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He tied the rope to Star's saddle and urged the pony forward.

The X Bar X Boys Lost in the Rockies

JAMES CODY FERRIS



HAMLYN WESTERNS
A PREVIEW PUBLICATION

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Chapter I

WHERE IS JACK FORRESTER?

"And so, Mr. Manley, we would not care to contract for the land unless we had the signature of this missing Jack Forrester."

The speaker, a wiry little lawyer from Denver, leaned across the wide, oaken table in the living room of the X Bar X ranch and spoke emphatically.

Bardwell Manley, the owner of the X Bar X, looked at him thoughtfully.

"As I understand it, Mr. Walsh," he said, "the Great Divide Water Company that you represent wants a certain piece of land that is owned jointly by Peter Ball of the 8 X 8 ranch, Jack Forrester, and myself, for purposes of irrigation, but unless you can get all three signatures to the contract, the deal is off."

"Right you are," and the lawyer started to put the maps, which had been spread on the table, into his brief case. "There is one hundred thousand dollars in it for you three if you can get hold of Jack Forrester," he went on. "If you cannot, we shall have to take up an option which we hold on another tract. We would like to get your land, however, if we possibly can, because of its better location."

Roy Manley, the elder son of Mr. Manley, who was sitting on a wooden settee listening to the talk, gripped his brother Teddy by the arm.

"One hundred thousand dollars!" he whispered in excitement. "Gosh, but that's a lot of money, Ted, even split three ways!"

"Whew!" Teddy was as excited as his brother.

"You've said it! And to think it all hinges on the finding of Jack Forrester! I hope Dad can locate him. He's just got to, that's all there is about it."

"Upon second thought, Mr. Manley," said the lawyer, rising and reaching for his hat, "I'm willing to give you thirty days in which to find Forrester. I think that's a fair arrangement. If you can't find him in that time and get his signature to the papers, we shall have to take up the water power rights in another territory, as I said. Good morning," and the lawyer abruptly left the room.

There was silence for a full minute after the departure of Mr. Walsh. Then Roy sprang forward.

"Dad!" he exclaimed breathlessly, his eyes shining with excitement, "what's it all about? You know Teddy and I didn't get in until almost the end of the conversation. We're both crazy to hear the whole story."

"You bet we are!" assented Teddy.

Bardwell Manley smiled at the boys' enthusiasm, lighted his favourite corn cob pipe and leaned back in his chair.

"This incident brings back past days that I had almost forgotten," he began. "Years ago Peter Ball and I were on a hunt for gold. Everybody was gold mad in those days, and all sorts of rumours were in the air. We prospected for several months but did not make a strike. Then a man by the name of Jack Forrester came along. He claimed to know about everything in the gold-mining game, and we believed him. The three of us joined forces and started to prospect in a new location where Forrester was sure we would find gold."

"Did you find it?" interrupted Teddy eagerly. "You never told us that you were once a gold-hunter!"

Mr. Manley shook his head.

"No," he answered. "We did not. We searched and searched, and covered a great deal of ground, but could

discover no gold. Forrester was always sure there was some just ahead, but it always eluded us."

"Gosh, it must have been discouraging!" Teddy's eyes were sympathetic. "What did you do then?" •

"Peter Ball and I quit gold-hunting and went back to the cattle business, and——"

"And Forrester?" Teddy could never wait until the end of a story.

"Forrester wouldn't give up. He was gold crazy. We gave him his stake and he started out again always believing that some day he would be rich."

"Did he ever strike it?" asked Roy.

"I didn't see him again for a great many years," answered Mr. Manley, "and then he was still searching, with luck just around the corner. About ten years ago he came to the X Bar X and——"

"Wow! Whoopee!" Roy nearly fell off his chair in his excitement. "I remember him, Dad, now that you speak of him. A short, stocky fellow, rather bent over, and had a long, grey moustache that he was always pulling. Had a scar on his left cheek, too. Told us a story of how a wildcat clawed him one night while he was asleep."

"That's Forrester," laughed Mr. Manley. "You've got a good memory, Roy. That was a long time ago."

"Sure. But I put him right into my little think-tank. I'd know him again the minute I saw him. You recollect the old fellow, don't you, Ted?"

"Can't say I do," responded Teddy, with a grin. "Was probably too busy at the time to take notice."

"Huh! Can't expect children to think about anything but play."

"Is that so?" Teddy grew indignant. "Just how much older is the young man than I am, I wonder! Twelve months! Doesn't like to play, himself? Oh, no! But, really, Roy, I don't remember this man Forrester. Sorry, old boy!"

"Yip! Yip! I've got it!"

"Looks as if you had something this morning," said Mr. Manley, laughing. "What is it now, Roy?"

"Just opened another box in my think-tank. Nick Looker saw Forrester only a few weeks ago, I'm quite sure."

Mr. Manley was interested.

"If that's so and he's around these parts, it's luck for us. It would be no use hunting for him if we hadn't a clue as to his whereabouts."

"I'll get Nick," and Roy dashed to the window.

"Hey, Nick! Nick Looker! Come in here! We want you!"

Roy had hardly come back from the window when Nick Looker appeared. He was a young, good-looking cowboy, and a special friend of the X Bar X boys, to whom he was much attached.

"Want to see me, boss?" he asked of Mr. Manley, as he came in.

"Yes. I want to ask you a few questions, Nick. Roy says you saw a man by the name of Jack Forrester recently. Is that so?"

"Yes, boss, I ran across him."

"Where, and when was it, Nick?"

"Over at Eagles about three weeks ago, maybe more. It was my day off and I was just coming out of the movies. The old fellow came up and asked me if I wasn't from the X Bar X. When I said I was, he wanted to know how you were, Mr. Manley."

"You never said a word about it to me, Nick. Why was that?"

"Well, I tell you, boss, I didn't think it was very important and I forgot all about it. Then one day I remembered, and told Roy. Sorry, boss, if I had known——"

"That's all right, Nick." Mr. Manley was elated to

know that Forrester had recently been so near the X Bar X. "It's very important that we should find this man before a month's up if we can. Did he tell you which way he was going?"

"I didn't pay much attention to what he said," answered Nick, "but I do remember that he spoke of Bitter Rock Creek. Said he was sure there was gold up there, and when he had made a strike he'd be rich."

"Bitter Rock Creek! That's in the Rockies, isn't it?" asked Roy.

"Yes. And it was three weeks ago that Nick saw Forrester. He can have gone a long way since then. Thanks, Nick, I won't keep you any longer, I know you're busy."

"Yes, Mr. Manley. We're getting off that first lot of cattle for shipment. The punchers will be ready to start with them in a few minutes."

"That's fine. I'll be with you shortly. Roy and Teddy, too," said Mr. Manley. "Business first, boys," he added, smiling and turning to his sons. "After that, if there's any time, we'll dream dreams. We've got to get those cattle off for shipment, as you know, and it will take us the best part of three or four weeks before the last lot is gone. Reckon we'll have to trust to luck that Jack Forrester will show up. Just at present we haven't any time to chase him."

"But, Dad!" Roy's eyes were big with excitement, "you're not going to pass up that hundred thousand, are you? I know you're busy now, getting the cattle off. But couldn't you and the punchers handle them and let Teddy and me hunt up this Jack Forrester? Whew! One hundred thousand dollars split three ways! Oh boy!"

Mr. Manley smiled at the boy's eagerness.

"It does sound good," he admitted. "That old piece of land has been lying idle for a great many years. It's

nothing but rocks. No timber to speak of; a scrubby growth that isn't good for anything. Fine for the irrigation project. But those cattle have to be shipped before we can do anything."

"Please, Dad!" Roy was persistent. "Let Teddy and me start on Forrester's trail. I'm sure we'll find him. We could start to-morrow, and before the month's up——"

But Mr. Manley did not answer. He was listening intently.

"Listen!" he cried. "What's that?"

There was a noise from without that gradually swelled in volume. The pound, pound, pound of a thousand hoofs! The snorting and bellowing of frightened cattle! The shrill cries and shouts of cowboys!

Roy sprang towards the door, his eyes blazing with excitement.

"The cattle have gotten away from the punchers!" he shouted. "They're stampeding! Come on, Teddy, we've got to help!"

Chapter II

THE STAMPEDE

With a flying leap, Roy Manley landed on the back of his favourite bronco, Star, who was tied to a post near the ranch-house veranda. Almost at the same instant, Teddy dashed down the steps and raced to where his pony, Flash, was standing, some fifty feet away.

All around was a mass of milling, frightened steers, bellowing, squealing, struggling to get somewhere, anywhere but the place they were.

The cattle had been started on their way to the railroad yard for shipment East when the excitement started. A number of the steers became frightened and

bolted. Others followed them. In another minute the strange, unreasonable fear was communicated to the rest of the herd, and the mad rush was on.

The thunder, caused by the pounding of a thousand hoofs, grew louder. Great clouds of dust were kicked up by the rushing animals, which was whirled chokingly into the faces of the riders by a stiff breeze, and almost blinded them for the moment.

The cowboys, headed by Nick Looker, were riding like the wind, trying to outdistance the herd and turn it towards the east. The cattle, however, were having things their own way for the time being, and refused to be driven by such things as mere men. Straightaway they pounded, out towards the open prairie, in the opposite direction to the railroad yard to which they had been expected to go.

Nick Looker, Roy and Teddy Manley were riding on the extreme left wing of the milling herd, trying to turn the steers towards the centre, when Nick's bronco slipped and went down, throwing Nick over its head.

For a moment that part of the herd nearest the cowboy wavered, then the lead steers turned and, followed by about two hundred of their companions, made straight for the prostrate Nick, who had not had time to pick himself up.

With his quick mental reaction Roy saw the danger.

"Come on, Teddy," he shouted shrilly. "We've got to split them! It's our only chance! Make a flying wedge! Now, Star, old boy," leaning far over the bronco's neck and patting him affectionately, "go to it, and don't get afraid!"

The two broncos leaped forward. Never in their lives had Star and Flash exerted themselves as in that moment. It seemed as if the little ponies knew what was required of them and rose to the occasion.

On came the thundering herd, heads down, snorting

and bellowing as they plunged forward recklessly in obedience to their leaders' whim. Nearer and nearer they came, until it seemed as if the two frail riders who dared oppose them would be swallowed up by the swirling, milling mass.

Nick Looker, who had now scrambled to his feet, but too late to remount and join in the assault, gasped and his heart almost stopped beating as he watched. Could the boys make it? It seemed almost suicide to attempt such a thing, yet it had been done, Nick knew, on rare occasions. In those few seconds of suspense Nick Looker seemed to have lived a lifetime. He could not help!

Just as Nick was about to give up hope, something happened. The Manley boys and the herd were less than thirty feet from each other when the two lead steers faltered for a moment and seemed uncertain what course to take. Then one curved to the left and the other to the right.

With a swing and a pounding of hoofs, the herd divided, part following one leader and part the other. On they pressed without so much as a look at the two boys, who had reined in their broncos as the herd split.

Nick Looker and the X Bar X boys were safe!

As Roy and Teddy jumped from their mounts, Nick came running up with outstretched hand.

"You saved my life, boys. I can't——" he began, but Roy, who hated what he called a scene, interrupted:

"Close call, wasn't it, Nick? I'll tell a maverick it was. But we made it! Gosh, Ted, I thought at one time it was all over but the flowers! How about you?"

"Sure did," responded Teddy a little shakily. "Gosh, how those fellows did come! Just like a tornado. But we split them and that's what we set out to do."

Nick Looker, who had climbed into the saddle, was still shaking nervously.

"Snap out of it, Nick," admonished Roy when he

noticed the cowboy's agitation. "It's all in the day's work. The three of us are alive and without a scratch. Say! we've got to help or those punchers will never get the herd to the station. Come on! We'll round 'em up or know the reason why!"

While Roy and Teddy Manley are tearing over the prairie to aid the punchers in rounding up the fractious cattle, perhaps the reader who may not have met them before would like to know a little of the history of these fun-loving, adventurous sons of the plains.

The X Bar X ranch, thirty hours' train ride west of Chicago, near the Rocky Run River, was owned by Bardwell Manley. Roy and Teddy, the two X Bar X boys, had been at a school near Denver, but had been allowed to come home by their father to help on the ranch, on account of a shortage of punchers, much to the boys' delight.

The first book of this series, entitled "The X Bar X Boys on the Ranch", introduced the Manley family, which consisted of Bardwell Manley; his wife, who was beloved by all the cowboys and affectionately called by them "the blonde angel of the West"; the two boys, Roy and Teddy; and their younger sister, Belle Ada, a dark-eyed, fun-loving girl with whom the boys had many a frolic.

In "The X Bar X Boys at Grizzly Pass", the volume preceding this one, were told the exciting adventures of the X Bar X boys while riding herd in the dead of winter; their fights with wolves, bears, and other wild animals on a lonely mountain; and the final rescue of the cattle from the hands of rustlers at Grizzly Pass. In this volume the reader also met again the vivacious nieces of Mrs. Ball of the 8 X 8 ranch, Nell Willis and Ethel Carew, who had but lately taken Belle Ada Manley home with them for a visit in New York.

To "know the reason why", as Roy Manley expressed

it, the thousand or more cattle could not be rounded up, was not difficult. When a lot of cattle stampede there is no manner of knowing to what length they will go. Fear is more contagious than the hoof and mouth disease, and when a herd becomes possessed of it, anything may happen.

The animals who bore the X Bar X brand were that day as wild a lot of steers as ever trod the prairie, and for a long time the cowboys failed utterly in their efforts to calm them.

On and on pounded the herd, kicking up great billows of dust from the dry, hard soil, which had not been rained upon for several weeks, until the punchers, riding at their heels, were almost suffocated.

The best and most experienced cowboys of the X Bar X were on duty that day, led by Roy and Teddy Manley and Nick Looker, the foreman of the ranch. Gus Tripp, Nat Raymond, and even Pop Burns, the oldest man on the ranch who, despite his years, could ride with the best of them, were trying their hardest to stem the stampede.

It was hard riding for all of them, but the men were bound to win in the end. Little by little the cattle were slowed up and broken into small groups which could be handled more easily.

It was with one of these groups of vicious steers on the extreme west of the line that Roy Manley found himself late in the afternoon.

Roy thought he had broken up a mass of cattle that had been milling around fiercely and had given him considerable trouble, and he had started to ride away.

Suddenly the position of the cattle changed. They ranged themselves in a half circle, with Roy in the centre. Swiftly the two ends were closing in upon him.

"Beat 'em to it, Star!" Roy shouted to the little bronco as he urged it forward. But it was too late, the pony had

not gone far before the ends of the line came together with a crash that knocked several of the steers to the ground. .

Roy was in the middle of the circle of angry, plunging animals that at any moment might converge upon him and crush him!

Chapter III

NICK TO THE RESCUE

The maddened cattle were everywhere at once, stamping, bellowing, plunging, and lowering their heads in vicious rushes and jabs at any of the others that might be in their path.

Roy Manley knew that there had been no concerted attack upon him, but that, through his own carelessness, he had gotten into a milling mass of steers from which it would be difficult to extricate himself without probable injury.

The cattle were now moving around in a circle, slowly massing themselves together and pushing and jostling one another in their mad frenzy.

If Roy should attempt to push through the wall of steers, in all probability he would be crushed to death or injured seriously. After a minute's thought he gave up that plan of escape.

If he should move with the whirling herd, it might be possible that a sudden break in their ranks would give him an opportunity to ride through. This plan, however, was almost as dangerous as the other. At any moment the steers might push against and gore him.

Roy's thoughts raced, and at last he decided that the better plan would be to keep perfectly still as long as it

was possible, in order not to attract the attention of the cattle to himself, and trust to luck.

If only Teddy or some of the punchers would notice that he was not with them and would come and break through that menacing circle of beef and brawn!

Roy stood up in the stirrups and looked about him. Stretching far to the west was the main herd, moving slowly at last in the direction of the railroad station at Eagles, after almost a day's stampede.

At the extreme end of the line he could recognise the red and yellow plaid shirt of Nick Looker, which looked like a bit of prairie fire as the sun caught the colours and threw them into relief against the background of the sky.

Farther down the line he could see Nat Raymond and Pop Burns and the other punchers strung out for half a mile with Teddy at the far end, driving and hammering at the restless steers that as yet had not been thoroughly calmed. If he could only make known to the punchers his predicament he knew they would come flying.

Closer and closer pressed the circle of moving steers. Several times as one drew nearer, Roy could feel its hot breath as it snorted and bellowed angrily, only to swerve away again as another animal crowded it to one side.

If he were to be killed, however, Roy Manley determined that the killer should pay. His hand crept towards the holster on the saddle and his fingers gripped the pistol which he always carried.

Then, like a flash, an inspiration came to Roy. The signal call for help in time of danger that had been agreed upon between the X Bar X boys and the punchers was three shots fired in quick succession. If he should give the signal, would the punchers at such a long distance away be able to hear him? Roy doubted.

The sudden firing would probably inflame the cattle to renewed frenzy, the result of which would be that

Roy would go down in the mêlée. Was the chance worth taking?

Roy looked again at the swirling cattle that were pushing closer to him every minute. He hesitated no longer. The pistol flashed from the holster and was pointed upwards.

Bang! Bang! Bang! The air was suddenly riven with the sharp crack of the revolver. Three spurts of smoke rose lazily into the blue.

At the sound the milling steers plunged more frantically than before and pressed and crowded against Star and his rider. But in that moment of peril Roy Manley had no thought of his personal danger. He was standing up in the stirrups, looking out towards the west.

Crack! Crack! Crack! came the answering shots.

Roy's heart leaped. He had been heard and help would soon come. Already the cowboys had turned their horses towards him. Unmindful of the plunging, milling mass about him, Roy watched the coming of the punchers.

The red and yellow shirt of Nick Looker was in the lead. While Roy had always twitted Nick about his choice of colours, never had anything been more beautiful to his eyes than the sight of that same gay-checked jumper as it drew nearer.

There was a sudden plunging of the cattle as the punchers rode up, whooping and shouting.

"Whoopee! Ride 'em, cowboy! Don't let 'em get the best of you! Steady there, Roy! Look out for yourself! Yip! Yip! Wow!"

With shouts and punches the cowboys broke through the vicious circle in which Roy had been a prisoner. The steers hesitated for a moment, then loped away to join the rest of the herd which was now under control.

• "Good old Nick!" Roy's eyes shone as he grasped his friend's hand. "Always on the job! If it hadn't been for

you—— Well, for half a minute I thought I was a goner, I'll tell a maverick!"

"Oh boy!" burst in Teddy, who, being the farthest away, had been the last to ride up. "That was some spurt, I'll tell the world! Sorry I didn't get here until it was all over, Roy. I'd like to have been in on it."

"You were the farthest away," Roy reminded him.

"Think you can manage them now, Nick?" asked Roy, after some of the excitement had passed. "If so, Ted and I will beat it back to the X Bar X. We're just going to make Dad let us go in search of Jack Forrester. If Dad doesn't want the money we do."

"Yes, I'll drive them to the station with the help of the other boys," answered Nick, looking out over the now slowly moving herd. Then he added mischievously: "Reckon Nell Willis could help you spend some of that money. But you'll have to give Teddy a part of it for Curly. If I didn't have a girl over at Eagles who's stuck on me, believe I'd make a play for one of those Easterners myself and cut you fellows out."

There was nothing sentimental about either Roy or Teddy, but the two girls from the East had been great friends of theirs during the visit at the 8 X 8 ranch, and the punchers never missed an opportunity to have some fun at their expense.

"Oh, by the way!" exclaimed Teddy, putting his hand in his inside pocket. "That reminds me of something!"

"Yeah? What is it, old dear? Anything startling?" Roy wanted to know.

"Got a letter from Belle Ada just before we left," explained Teddy, pulling an envelope from his pocket. "Haven't had time to read it yet. Hope the kid is all right."

"What'd she say?" demanded Roy.

"Don't know yet, foolish. Wait a minute! Give me a

chance to peruse it," and Teddy tore open the envelope.

"H-m," he began after a minute. "Your sister says she's having the time of her life and getting to be sophisticated. What's that, Roy? Can you tell me?"

"Mean to tell me you don't know? Gosh, what an ignorant brother I have!"

"Well, if you know so much, what does it mean?"

"Means that you know everything that's worth while and a lot of things that aren't. Anything else?"

"Says Curly sends her love to me, and Belle Ada says that she's getting prettier every day," Teddy added.

"Who? Belle Ada or Curly?"

"Curly, of course, you dumb-bell. Gosh, Curly couldn't be any prettier than she was when she was here. Could she, Roy?"

"Go on." Roy was not particularly interested in Ethel Carew's good looks. "Doesn't she say anything about Nell?"

"Oh, yeah! I believe she does mention her," replied Teddy loftily. "Here it is: 'Nell sends Roy her love and says she'll write to him when she gets time. Very busy these days, and——'"

"Gosh!" Roy's face fell. "Doesn't Belle Ada say anything about when she's coming home? The girls promised to come back with her. Sure about that, Ted?"

"Sure." Teddy was as disappointed as his brother that no mention of the girls' return was made, but he would not have let Roy know it for the world.

"We're really too busy now, Roy, to think about the girls," Teddy went on. "We've got to find Jack Forrester, and that job looks to me as if it were going to be a big one."

"We'll find him if Dad lets us go," rejoined Roy, with conviction, "or——"

"Well, so long you waddies," interrupted Nick

Looker. "I must be getting along," and Nick galloped away after the herd.

"Come on, Ted. Beat you to the ranch!"

Roy leaped to Star's back and turned the bronco's head towards the X Bar X.

"Bet you don't, or I'm a dodo bird," and Teddy, on Flash, riding like the wind, nosed his way past his brother.

When the boys reached the X Bar X Mrs. Manley was awaiting them. When they rode up her face brightened and the anxious look that had been in her eyes all day faded away.

"Here we are, Mom, safe and sound," announced Roy, as he sprang from the saddle and threw his arms around his mother. "Had a tough time to get the cattle in shape," he went on. "We finally did it, though, and Nick and the other fellows are taking them to Eagles."

Mrs. Manley put her arms around both boys and drew them to her.

"I'm thankful you're all right," she said, smiling. "I was beginning to get worried because you were away so long. By the way," she added, "there's a man inside who's been telling your father that he was in touch with Jack Forrester recently. You'd better go in and——"

The boys were away before Mrs. Manley had finished, and went into the little office in which their father was talking with a stranger.

"This is Mr. Palmer, boys, of the Three O ranch," was Mr. Manley's introduction. "He was just telling me that he saw Forrester not long ago."

"When? Where was he?" Both boys were eager.

"I met him about a week ago out on the trail," said Mr. Palmer. "He told me that he was heading for Bitter Rock Creek. Said he would follow the creek to Tumble Mountain, where he was certain he would find gold."

"Only a week ago!" exclaimed Roy. "Oh, Dad, let us go after him?"

"You wouldn't have much trouble in catching up to him, I reckon," said Mr. Palmer, as he reached for his hat. "The old fellow isn't very strong on his pins these days, and he doesn't travel very fast. Wish you luck, if you try it," and the owner of the Three O went out, smiling.

After the boys had told their father about the adventures of the day, Roy's eyes grew serious.

"Dad," he said, "you've just got to let us look for Jack Forrester. To get that money would mean a whole lot to all concerned. Peter Ball would be mighty glad to get it, and of course, Jack Forrester, and——"

"And Bardwell Manley," continued their father, laughing. "Well, boys, I guess I'll have to let you go. So get ready as soon as you can and be off."

"Wow! Whoopee! Dad, you're a brick!" shrilled Teddy, in his excitement, and Roy, although he was less demonstrative, was fully as pleased as his brother at Mr. Manley's decision to let them go.

"Wish Nick Looker could come along, too," said Roy. "He'd be such a help and——"

"Well, he can't," replied Mr. Manley. "He's got to look after shipping the cattle, and can't be spared. Come on, boys, supper's ready," and Mr. Manley started for the dining room.

"We'll get ready to-morrow and start right away," whispered Roy, as they followed, "and we'll find Jack Forrester or we won't come back ourselves."

"You've said it!" agreed Teddy eagerly. "Can't start any too soon for me. On to Bitter Rock Creek!"

Chapter IV.

ON TO BITTER ROCK CREEK

"Of course," observed Roy Manley as the two X Bar X boys were dressing the next morning, "we'll have to prepare for a long trip. It's all very well to say that we can find Forrester without much trouble; but you know, Ted, there are a good many trails and defiles in the Rockies, and if you take the wrong turn—well, you're apt to wander about for days before you get right again."

"Yeah! So I've heard said," answered Teddy, scowling at a tangled shoestring. "Then again, maybe we'll find him right off. There's no telling."

"May bees don't fly in June, Ted. Gosh, it's June now, and Curly and Nell aren't back yet! It would be awful, wouldn't it, if they gave us the go-by?"

"They won't." Teddy seemed quite sure. "They're having such a good time in New York that I don't know that I blame them for wanting to linger. What is there out here? Nothing but cows and broncos and grass and——"

"Us," laughed Roy. "You seem to forget, Mr. Manley, that we are the particular attraction when it comes to city girls. 'In the great open spaces where men are men.'"

"You hate yourself, don't you?" retorted Teddy, grinning. "Thought it was the scenery that attracted the girls. Never mind, old man, if Nell marries a New Yorker—after all, New York's her home—maybe they will come out here to spend their vacations, and then——"

"Snap out of it and put on a cinch strap. You know

the girls will be back before long, and you'll be mighty glad to see Curly. Own up to it now."

"Sure I will," admitted Teddy. "To say nothing of Belle Ada. Gosh, Roy, I bet when she comes home she'll put on more airs than a turkey gobbler!"

"We'll have some fun taking them out of her." Roy was pleased at the prospect. "Golly, I pity the poor kid if she starts anything like that around here."

"Me, too! Ready, Roy?" and with a bound the boys were clattering down the stairs that led to the dining room.

"Haven't time to eat very much this morning, Mom," explained Teddy, as a second helping of cakes was brought in. "Your two sons have got to get ready to go gold hunting. Wow! won't it be great when we come walking in with Jack Forrester in our midst?"

"Do we get a commission, Dad, if we find Jack Forrester?" asked Roy.

Mr. Manley laughed heartily.

"I reckon you ought to get something, Roy. If you and Teddy find Jack Forrester you'll deserve a great deal of credit."

"Credit? Huh!" Teddy turned up his nose in disdain. "Don't want credit, Dad. Nothing but the cold cash will suit us."

"All right, the cold cash then," replied Mr. Manley. "Anything you say goes if you find your man."

"Hooray! Did you hear that, Roy? C-a-s-h, cash! Come on to the bunk-house; there's a lot to be done before we start."

At the bunk-house the boys found several of the cow-boys who were envious of their good fortune in being permitted to search for the missing Forrester.

After having driven the herd to the railroad station, Pop Burns and Nat Raymond had ridden back, arriving at the X Bar X in the early morning hours.

"Howdy, boys," was Pop's greeting. "Got them onery critters to Eagles all right. Then me and Nat rid back. Never like to be away from the old bunk-house over night if I can help it. Nick Looker and the rest of the waddies can get the steers aboard the cars without us."

"Sure that was why you hurried back, Pop?" Roy had a suspicion that there was another reason.

"Well, I—I thought, too," began Pop, a little flustered, squinting his little, beady eyes and rubbing his bald head, "that maybe you'd take me with you on your trip. Like as not you won't know Forrester when you see him. Now me, being in these parts for a good many years, could identify him and——"

"Sorry, Pop, but Dad wouldn't hear of it. Says he needs the rest of the fellows here to look after the cattle just now. Several shipments are to be made within the next three weeks, and the punchers will be kept busy. Lucky to be able to get away ourselves."

"Sho, now, isn't that too bad? I rather reckoned on going," and Pop's face fell. Then it brightened again.

"Tell you what I'll do," he began eagerly. "I'll lend you that yaller vest of mine I set so much store by. You can see it a mile away. Forrester is crazy about anything yaller. Makes him think of gold. If he gets a flash of that vest he'll run right towards it."

The old man spoke so seriously that Roy was half inclined to think he was in earnest.

"Thanks, Pop; but I couldn't think of taking it. Might get torn or lost, and then what would you do when we had a party?"

"That's so!" There was a twinkle in Pop's grey eyes. "I reckon I'd better keep it here. But if you want it you can have——"

"Say, Teddy," interrupted Nat Raymond. "I've an idea. You take my flute along with you. Reckon you can play it as good as I can, and——"

"What in the world would I want to take a flute for?" asked Teddy. "You must think, Nat, that this is going to be a pleasure excursion. It's serious business, let me tell you."

"No," responded Nat seriously, "I don't think that. But I read one time about a feller who used to take his flute out into the woods and play it, and everything that heard it came running. Just don't remember his name. Pot, I think."

"Pot? Gosh, but you're ignorant, Nat. His name was Pan. Put that in your think-tank."

"Yes, that was it!" exclaimed Nat eagerly. "Pan. He used to sit on a rock and play. Then all the goats and other animals came galloping."

"And I'm supposed to sit on a rock in the Rockies and pipe for Forrester to come! Is that the idea?"

Nat refused to be convinced otherwise.

"If he heard you I bet Jack would want to know what it was all about, out there in the wilds."

"I'll tell a maverick, he would," laughed Roy. "But we can't stand gabbing any longer, Ted. Hey, you waddies, get busy and help us. We want to start by noon. Where are those rifles?"

Getting ready for their trip occupied the X Bar X boys the greater part of the morning. They cleaned the rifles, tested them, and made sure that their cartridge belts were filled. Roy also added two extra boxes of cartridges, packing them in the provision pack.

"Don't forget to put in the fishing tackle," cautioned Teddy, who was cleaning his revolver. "We might have to live off the land before we get back."

"Ever see any fish swimming on land?" chuckled Roy. "Might meet a few walking down the trail."

"Think you're smart, don't you?" Teddy always liked to chaff his brother. "There are fish in Bitter Rock Creek

I've been told, but they won't be any good to us unless we get them on land. See, Mr. Smarty?"

After much discussion it was decided not to take a portable tent, but stand their chances of finding a suitable camping place under a ledge or in a grove.

"Too much weight," announced Roy. "We have enough duffel now to load a pack of army mules."

At last everything was in readiness. Star and Flash were groomed and saddled and an extra bronco they were to take along to carry the duffel was loaded with the equipment.

"I'll ride with you as far as the 8 X 8 ranch," announced Mr. Manley. "I want to talk with Peter Ball again about this matter. If you do find Forrester, it will be a windfall for Peter. He's had pretty hard sledding lately."

The boys kissed their mother and then jumped into the saddle.

"You lead, Dad," said Roy, who was holding Star in check with difficulty. "'Bye, Mom. Now for the Rockies!"

Half a mile from the 8 X 8 ranch, near a turn in the trail, the party saw a horseman riding towards them.

"There's Peter now!" exclaimed Mr. Manley. "Good! Now I won't have to go all the way. I want to get back as soon as possible. "Hello, Peter," he called, as the ranch owner galloped up. "The boys have started off to find Jack Forrester. Wish them luck!"

The men had stopped near an old shack that stood alongside the trail, a place that had once been used for storing tools.

"I sure hope you will find Forrester," answered Mr. Ball. "I don't think you will have any trouble in recognising him, even if he is travelling under an assumed name, as he sometimes does, to throw prospectors off

the scent, he says. He's short and stocky, has grey hair, and stoops a little. And don't forget the scar on his left cheek where the wildcat clawed him. Poor old Jack. He's never struck gold yet, but he's always hoping he will. If he gets his share of that hundred thousand dollars, it will keep him the rest of his life."

"Yes, thirty-three thousand dollars is not to be sneezed at."

"I'd sneeze a lot of times for that much money!" laughed Teddy.

Thereupon men and boys began an earnest conversation concerning the finding of Jack Forrester and of getting the old prospector to assign his rights to the water company so the three men could get that offered one hundred thousand dollars.

"Seems like a fairy yarn, but it's real," declared Roy. "But we had better be on our way. Come on, Teddy. Guess we'll be back in a week or maybe ten days."

The two X Bar X boys rode off full of high hopes. But perhaps they would not have been so confident had they seen the two men lurking behind the old shack—two men who had listened eagerly and gloatingly to all that had been said.

Chapter V.

THE PLOTTERS

The two men who emerged from the shelter of the shack after the X Bar X boys and the ranch owners had disappeared from view were curious-looking creatures.

One of them was tall and thin, so thin, it seemed as if a smart blow would break him in two. He had small piercing grey eyes and a nose that had been knocked out of shape in a fight several years before. His mouth was

tight-lipped and when opened showed a row of ugly-looking molars that reminded one of a wolf's fangs.

His companion was quite the reverse of the taller man. He was short and stocky and had huge hairy arms that might have belonged to an ape. His head was covered with a close-cut crop of fiery red hair, and his face from the eyes down was pock-marked. A cat with a knife at one end of his mouth made it longer than it otherwise would have been, and gave to him a peculiar leering expression that was very unpleasant.

As soon as the sound of the broncos' hoofs had ceased, the taller of the two men ran hurriedly up the trail, using great care to look from side to side to see that there was no one near by. Having satisfied himself on that score, he returned to the shack where the other was lounging against the wall, smoking a pipe.

"See anything of 'em, Chick?" asked he of the pock-marked face eagerly. "No danger of 'em coming back an' findin' us?"

"Not a sign of hide or hair of 'em," answered Chick. "The boys won't come back right away, believe me. They're too keen on findin' that old geezer, Forrester. Not until——"

"Queer story, Chick!" interrupted the other.

"We might make money out of this, Stubby," went on Chick, his little, beady eyes growing keener than before. "We're the only waddies who knows about the search for this here Forrester, except the Manleys and Peter Ball. Are you on?"

"You bet!" Stubby's slashed mouth worked and leered curiously. "If we can only find old Jack before them kids do! He'd sell his interest in that claim for ten dollars, or I'm a tree toad!"

"How much money you got?" inquired Chick anxiously.

"Oh, about sixty dollars. How about you?"

"Same here, if 't isn't lost." Chick clapped his hand to the pocket of his faded vest and a relieved look came into his face when he felt the bulge. "We'll make it a hundred if we have to, supposin' Forrester holds out."

This speech had a strange effect upon Stubby. He clenched his fists fiercely and the pock-marks assumed a purple hue, making a grotesque combination with his fiery hair. He tried to speak, but the words seemed to stick in his throat.

"What's the matter, Stub?" asked Chick, apparently undismayed at the other's actions. "What's bitin' you?"

"Offer him a hundred plunks, eh? Why, you blithering idiot, you must be crazy! Ten dollars, I said! Ten's the limit. We don't want to throw away good money when we don't have to. You always was careless with your kale!"

"Well, ain't puttin' up a hundred dollars to win more than thirty thousand a good scheme? I'll say it is. Thirty-three thousand berries split fifty-fifty? It will be Palm Beach for us next winter, Stubby, and no ridin' the rods either."

"It ain't necessary to go higher than ten," went on Stubby with conviction. "Besides, if we offer the geek a hundred he might get suspicious and hold off altogether."

"How suspicious?" Chick wanted to know. •

"Apt to think we'd struck gold on Tumble Mountain and wanted to get him out. Shrewd old duck, that Jack Forrester, from what I've heard. Have to handle him carefully. Suppose he smells a rat and won't do anything until he's seen Bard Manley or Peter Ball? Jumping willikins, we'd be in the soup if he wouldn't sign!"

Chick's eyelids narrowed and he looked at Stubby queerly.

"He'll sign," he growled. "If he won't do it willingly, there's other ways to make him. Let him starve for a

week; don't give him any water; tie him to a tree all night and let him think we've left him for the wild animals. Stubby, you're talking foolish. Not sign? You bet he'll sign!"

Stubby was chuckling softly to himself and did not appear to hear what Chick was saying.

"Spill it. What's the joke?"

"Was thinking how it was handed to us," responded Stubby, still chuckling. "Right off a silver platter, as it was. They had to stand right by the old shack and spill the whole business. Think we'd better start, Chick? Don't want to let them kids get too far ahead."

Chick shook his head in disagreement.

"No hurry. We'll let 'em lead the way and save us the trouble of huntin' trail until they get scent of Forrester. Then we'll beat up ahead of 'em and sign him up first."

"We ought to make our plans before we start," commented Stubby. "Then we won't have to think when the time comes."

Chick's forehead wrinkled into a frown and his eyes half closed again.

"Think? Whoever accused you of thinking, Stubby? No one, not if he was in his right mind. You haven't brains enough to bait a mousetrap. I'm the brains of this combination. If it wasn't for me you'd——"

Stubby spat angrily.

"Cut out that kind of talk," he shouted. "Guess I can think as well as you!"

"Guess what? If it hadn't been for me we'd never have been in on this. When I saw those waddies comin' I said, 'let's hide behind the shack and maybe we'll hear something we oughtn't to.' Right, ain't I?"

Stubby nodded sullenly.

"And we did hear something that's goin' to bring us money if you don't ball things up. Gosh, Stubby, come

to think of it, we shouldn't split fifty-fifty on this deal. I ought to get the big end."

Stubby jumped from the log on which he had been sitting.

"Say, Chick Harrison, don't you try to double-cross me!" he shouted angrily. "If you do I'll quit cold and spill the beans to Bard Manley. Bet he'd make it worth my while. No, sir! You can't do anything like that and get away with it!"

Chick saw that he had made a mistake in rousing Stubby's ire, and hastened to mollify him.

"Ah, come, Stubby, don't act up. I didn't mean nothing. Sure, we'll have to stick together on this. Me and you have been pals a long time and seen a lot of hard luck together. Now, we've got some kale almost in our fists, we've got to stick."

"Guess you're right, Chick. We shouldn't fight. But I want something to say about this, and I'm going to."

"Sure, Stubby. Shoot it."

"Well," began Stubby, pleased that Chick allowed him to have his way, "about makin' plans. I say we ought to follow those Manley kids pretty close and not let 'em get too far ahead of us. 'Cause why? They might give us the slip. 'Twouldn't do any harm, as far as I can see, to ride right up to 'em and begin gabbin'. They don't know us, and maybe, because they don't know much about Tumble Mountain—not like we do—we could give 'em a bum steer up some trail and get 'em lost. Then we'd beat it after Forrester and like as not get him before they got turned around again."

"You're pretty slick, Stubby, after all," said Chick admiringly. "And something else you said has set me thinkin'."

"What is it?" Stubby was more pleased with himself than he had been for a long time. "Spill it, Chick."

"What you said about Bard Manley makin' it worth

your while if you went to him and gave our plan away. Bet we could make a dicker with him if he saw we meant business. We'll beat those boys to it and get Forrester's signaturg. Then we'll get hold of this fellow Manley and Pete Ball and make 'em talk turkey. We'll make 'em give a good share of the water company money to us. What say, Stubby?"

Stubby's joy knew no bounds.

"You've said it, Chick!" he shouted. "Maybe we can get the whole hundred thousand if we work it right. Leave that to you. You're smart in such things! Can't be beat!"

Chick was not averse to flattery and grinned broadly.

The two men sneaked quietly away into the woods, found their horses, and in five minutes were headed after the X Bar X boys, on their way towards Bitter Rock Creek.

Chapter VI

AN UNEXPECTED TUMBLE

When the X Bar X boys turned up the trail that led in the direction of Bitter Rock Creek, it was with high hopes that their quest would meet with success.

"We're going to find Forrester," asserted Roy confidently, as he gave Star free rein up the winding path. "That's all there is about it! Reckon Dad was a little dubious about our finding him, though he never let on."

"This is the life!" sang Teddy gaily. "Not a thing to worry about and a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow! Wow!"

It was late in the afternoon when the boys came to a spot that, they concluded, would be a good place in which to spend the night.

They had made slow progress the first few hours. The trail was narrow and winding, covered here and there with rocky outcroppings that made the going exceedingly dangerous.

At last the path widened, and for several miles the trail ran as straight as an arrow through dense growths of pine, hemlock, and fir.

The silence of that June afternoon was unbroken except for the sharp yap, yap of a startled fox that whisked its way through the bushes at the approach of the boys; the chattering of bright-eyed squirrels that darted up the trees and along the branches, scolding because they had been disturbed; and the whir, whir-r-r of a couple of partridges that sounded like the buzzing of a swarm of bees as the birds whirled up and away before Teddy or Roy could unlimber their rifles.

"Gee, Roy, here's just the place for a night's lodging!" exclaimed Teddy, as they came in view of an overhanging ledge at the back of which a natural funnel had been gutted out in the soft stone by the action of the rain.

The boys jumped from their mounts and tethered them near by, together with the bronco that was carrying the duffel. Versed in woodcraft, the boys soon had a fire going in the natural fireplace at the back of the cliff. In another minute bacon was frying and coffee boiling, the smell of which made Teddy so hungry he could hardly wait until the meal was ready.

"This is certainly bully!" he exclaimed, pausing with a piece of bacon half-way to his mouth to inhale the aroma. "Gosh, Roy, I could sit here for ever if we didn't have to hunt up that old fellow, Forrester."

"Ought to have brought Nat's flute along and piped for him to come up," laughed Roy. "I don't feel much like going on myself, but after we've had a night's rest we'll have more pep. Golly, but I'm tired!"

As he saw the pony, Roy's heart leaped, then almost skipped a beat as he realised that Teddy was nowhere in sight.

"Yoo-hoo, Teddy!" he shouted. "It's Roy! Where are you?"

"Where are you?" came back the echo with such clearness that Roy for a moment thought it was Teddy answering him.

To the right of where the bronco was standing was a small windfall that had been swept down by a recent storm. With blurred eyes Roy tried to pierce the screen of leaves and branches that had become interlaced in their rush down the mountain side, but could not. Then, without a moment's hesitation, he swung himself over the edge of the break.

There was a rush of dirt and pebbles as he slid down, scratching his hands and arms as he struck against the sharp stones that the slide had left uncovered. On and on he went, bumping and bruising himself, until in another minute he landed with a thud by the side of the startled bronco.

At the sight of Roy suddenly precipitated down the bank, Flash reared and plunged with excitement. Then, as Roy threw his arm around the pony's neck and spoke to it soothingly, the horse whinnied in delight and nuzzled its soft nose against Roy's cheek.

"Where's Teddy, old fellow? What's become of him? Oh, if you could only talk! Hullo, Teddy! Where are you?"

Again there was silence, and there came a feeling of disaster that Roy found hard to shake off.

"Teddy!" he shouted again. "Teddy, where are you?"

For a minute there was no answer, and Roy was beginning to despair when from beneath the windfall of branches and twigs came a smothered shout.

"Down here, under the windfall. Don't stir or you'll fall in, too."

The reaction came and Roy trembled and great drops of perspiration stood on his forehead. Teddy was alive! Hurt, perhaps, but alive. This was no time to be weak! He must save him!

Roy went cautiously a little nearer to the windfall, but the crackling twigs warned him that unless he was careful he might easily share his brother's fate.

"Ted," he called shrilly, "are you hurt? Tell me!"

"No." The voice came stronger now as if the speaker were more sure of himself. "Just knocked cold for a few minutes. I'm all right, but almost smothered. Flash fell to his knees when the earth broke, and I shot over his head. Landed on the windfall and broke through. There's a big gully down here and the branches covered it. The sides are slippery and I can't climb out. You'll have to pull me up. But hurry, I can't breathe down here much longer. A lot of debris fell with me."

Roy's thoughts raced. On the duffel horse there was a coil of rope, but the bronco was at the top of the cliff, and to climb up seemed impossible. A detour would have to be made to get on the trail again. Teddy might be smothered by the time he, Roy, could get back. There must be another way.

Looking around, Roy caught sight of an abundance of running pine sprawled over the ground near by. He whipped out his knife and began to cut the runners.

"Carry on, Teddy!" he shouted. "I'm making a rope. Have it to you in a couple of minutes! All right?"

"Yes, but hurry. It's stifling down here!"

With the twisted strands of pine Roy soon formed a rope which he judged would be strong enough to pull Teddy up. One end of it he fastened to Flash's saddle, and the other around a heavy stone.

"Stand from under, Ted," he shouted. "I'm throwing

a rock down to you with a rope tied to it. Don't get hit."

"O.K. Let her come!" answered Teddy, and Roy dropped the rock on top of the windfall. There was a bending of branches and it was gone.

"Got it," came Teddy's voice, and a minute later: "I've fastened it around my shoulders. Pull me up now, but go carefully."

"Sure!" and Roy urged the bronco forward and away from the windfall. The branches creaked and snapped as the rope pulled over them, but the bronco kept on. Then, looking back, Roy saw Teddy's head appear through the leaves.

"Hurrah!" he shouted. "A minute more, Ted, and you'll be out."

Crack!

There came the sound of a sharp snap, and the pine rope, unable longer to bear the strain, broke in two. Teddy's head disappeared as quickly as it had come into view. Roy could hear the soft thud, thud, as the boy again landed on the bottom of the leaf-covered gully.

"Teddy, are you hurt?" shouted Roy, rushing back to the windfall and almost going in himself in his eagerness. "Teddy!"

Again the voice of Teddy Manley was silent.

Chapter VII

AN UNWELCOME VISITOR

With disregard for his own safety, Roy Manley began to climb out upon the branches and limbs that looked strong enough to bear his weight. For a moment they

held. But as Roy crawled farther, the leafy covering began to give way, and it was only by wriggling quickly backward and grasping hold of an overhanging bough that he managed to pull himself to safety.

"Teddy!" he shouted again, and this time there was a wild note in Roy's voice that sounded strangely in the quiet of the forest. "Teddy! Answer me! Are you hurt?"

From somewhere beneath the leafy blanket, that looked so innocent of danger, came a low moan. Then Teddy's voice, weak and faint:

"Took a tumble again that 'most finished me! What happened?"

"The pine rope broke and let you back," Roy told him. "Do you think you can keep up until I go around and get on to the trail again and get the rope from the bronco?"

"No. Can't you make another rope?"

"Sure," shouted back Roy. "And I'll make it double the size. Just lie there and take things as easy as you can, and I'll have it done in a jiffy."

It was some minutes, however, before Roy had braided several strands of the running pine together and made the rope double the thickness of the one that had broken.

"Look out, below!" he called, as he dropped another stone, to which the rope was tied, on to the windfall. "Here comes the life-saver."

"Aye, aye!" came the voice from below. Then, after what seemed to Roy to be an age: "All ready! Pull for the shore!"

Flash started again up the hill, and Roy pulled hand over hand until Teddy once more appeared. This time there was no accident, and with a long pull by Roy and a cautious wriggle on Teddy's part the younger boy stood once more on firm ground.

"A little groggy but still in the running," he remarked light-heartedly, as he sank down on a log and began to take in great gulps of air. "Gosh, but it was close down there! Thought I should smother. Feel better already."

Roy put his arm around his brother's shoulders.

"Good old Ted," he said affectionately. "Thought I had lost you that time. My, you don't know how funny I felt when you suddenly vanished."

"Thought I'd evaporated, did you?" laughed Teddy a little shakily. "Can't get rid of this hundred and forty pounds as easily as that. But say, Roy. Let's get back on the trail. I'm famished."

Teddy made sure that Flash had not injured his knees, then the boys started off.

It was more than half an hour, however, before they found a path that wound upward towards the trail. But soon after that they were by the side of Star and the duffel bronco, from whose pack the necessary food for a hasty lunch was quickly taken.

After the meal was finished and the broncos given their share of provender and taken down to a near-by creek for a drink, the boys explored a narrow cave that ran some distance into the side of the mountain.

Well ventilated from cracks in the rocks at the top, it proved an ideal place to rest after the exertions of the morning, and the boys stretched themselves upon the dry ground and in a few minutes were asleep.

How long they slept they did not know. Roy was the first to awake with a strange feeling that someone or something was looking at him and was getting closer and closer.

It was dark in the cave, as the day was waning, and the only light that came in was from the mouth of the cavern and a few rays that filtered through cracks in the rocks.

Raising himself on one elbow, Roy's eyes searched the darkness. At first he could distinguish nothing, and he was just beginning to think his imagination had been playing him tricks and that nothing was there when suddenly, directly in front of him, appeared two great balls of flaming fire that glowed vividly in the darkness. They were of a yellowish colour that, as they moved, changed to a greenish cast, then back to yellow again.

As Roy's eyes became accustomed to the darkness he could make out the dim shape of the animal, outlined against the background of the mouth of the cave, through which still came a few rays of light.

The beast was looking straight at Roy, and the boy watched it as it crouched lower and lower, creeping along slowly, its stomach almost touching the ground. In the misty light the animal assumed huge proportions.

The animal seemed about to spring. Then it raised itself slightly and sniffed the air as if suspicious of danger. For a moment it stood listening, then assumed its crouching position again and crept slowly towards the watching Roy, who now decided that it was a lynx. When the X Bar X boys had entered the cave to explore it and eventually to take a nap, they had left the three broncos tethered some distance away and had piled their rifles against the wall of the cave, half-way down its length.

Between the boys and safety now stood the lynx, with its gleaming eyes, its long sharp claws and bare teeth ready to rend its prey.

A slight movement by his side told Roy that Teddy was awake and had probably seen the cat also. At the sound from Teddy, the lynx seemed uneasy and its eyes grew brighter and more lurid.

"We've got to get those guns, Roy, or it's got us," whispered Teddy, with his lips to his brother's ear. "What'll we do?"

"Can't get them unless we make a dash for it," whispered back Roy. "Got your knife, Ted?"

"Yes. Hand right on it."

"I have mine. When I count three, jump up and yell and make a dash for the guns. If the cat gets one of us on the way we'll knife him. One of us ought to get past him and get a rifle. Ready?"

"All set!"

"One, two, three!"

At the last word the boys sprang up, yelling like a couple of wild Indians, and made a dash for the place where they had left the rifles.

There was a snarl and a hiss from the lynx, then a scream of rage. One of its forelegs reached out and its claws caught Roy by the arm, knocking him to the ground.

With a twist, the boy managed to wrench himself from the animal's grasp, and with a thrust of his hunting-knife he slashed the beast's stomach. The lynx screamed and hurtled itself into the air.

"Lay low, Roy. I have a gun!" shouted Teddy from the side of the cave.

Crack! Bang!

Teddy fired both barrels. The cave reverberated at the sound of the firing, and was filled with the acrid smoke from the exploded shells.

"Lucky shot! You got him!" cried Roy. "Have you a light?"

Teddy struck a match and lighted a dry piece of a branch that his hand had found.

"He's a beauty, too," he cried, as Roy picked himself up and together they examined the lynx, which was now dead.

After they had taken the skin from the lynx to add to their trophies, Roy suggested that they call it a day,

and the boys concluded to camp there for the night, which passed without further excitement.

The next morning, as they were getting ready to start, Roy took a map from his pocket and studied it carefully.

"I'm not sure that we're on the right trail," he told Teddy, after looking at the lines on the blue paper. "Golly, this is the worst ever! Never saw so many trails in my life. Looks like a Chinese puzzle. See what you can make out of it, Ted."

Teddy took the map and looked at it long and carefully.

"All Greek to me," he announced puckering up his forehead. "Say, if we shouldn't be going right and should miss Bitter Rock Creek and Jack Forrester, we'd never hear the last of it. What'll we do, Roy?"

Roy, nearly always ready with an answer, was silent for a full minute.

"I think that is where we are," he said, putting his finger on a spot on the map. "If so, we've got to turn to the left after the next right crossing. All we can do is to keep on until we find we're wrong—if we are wrong—then turn back."

Teddy was more serious than he had been for a long time.

"Whew! If we get lost, I'll be a dodo bird, and then some. Dad will think we're babes in the woods. Well, let's pull out and trust to luck."

The boys started, Roy riding ahead with the map in his hand. The trail twisted and turned like a wriggling snake, now narrowing and seeming about to be lost in the mass of trees, then widening again and leading straight ahead for perhaps half a mile.

It was in one of these wider spaces and near the close of the day's journey that Roy drew rein and listened.

"I hear horses' hoofs, as sure as I'm alive, Teddy.

Someone besides ourselves is going this way. Wonder if it can be Jack himself. If it isn't, we can ask the way, perhaps."

The newcomers, when they appeared, did not, however, appear to want to be interviewed. They were two men, mounted on fiery-looking broncos. With a sudden burst of speed they dashed madly past the two boys, taking no notice of their calls to stop. Enveloped in a cloud of dust, they disappeared around a turn in the trail.

"What do you think of that?" cried Teddy, in astonishment. "Wouldn't even look at us! Whew! They were certainly tough-looking fellows. Wouldn't like to meet them on a dark night without a gun."

"They surely were," agreed Roy. Then thoughtfully: "Reckon they were trying to get away from somebody, sheriff maybe, and didn't want to be delayed. They were on their way, though. Let's follow them."

The boys urged their broncos forward, but it was soon evident that the men could not be overtaken.

"Probably turned into one of these side trails," said Roy, as he reined in Star. "That's the last of them. I'd like to have talked to them, though. They evidently know their way around these parts. Well, Ted, let's make camp."

"Make camp, it is," replied Teddy.

It was nearly midnight, and the boys had been asleep, when Teddy grasped his brother by the arm.

"Quick, Roy," he whispered. "Somebody is at the horses!"

Chapter VIII

THE STORM

At his brother's words, Roy Manley was instantly awake and on the alert. Both boys remained quiet for a minute, listening intently and straining their eyes in the darkness, but in the blackness of the forest night they could see nothing.

How quiet it was! Not a sound except the sighing of the pines and the rustling of the leaves as the freshening wind swept over them. Not even an owl sounded its harsh, uncanny call.

"Gosh, Ted, you were dreaming," whispered Roy, in disgust. "There isn't a thing around. That fruit cake of Mom's you ate for supper set you to hearing things. Come on back to bed and go to sleep."

"There was somebody there," asserted Teddy stoutly. "I know there was. I was wide awake and thinking about that old map and whether we were on the right trail. Then I heard a noise over where the broncos are tied."

"What kind of noise?"

"Like someone creeping and sneaking around, then a twig snapped, and another. Twigs don't snap of themselves, Roy."

"Probably the broncos were restless and kicked around a bit."

"They were restless, all right." Teddy was convinced that he had heard somebody at the horses. "They stamped around as if they were scared. Come on, Roy, we'll investigate. Got your rifle?"

"Yes." Roy yawned lazily. "Gosh, Ted, I was dreaming, too. Thought that Nell——"

"Oh, of course it was Nell Willis," teased Teddy. "No wonder we get lost in the Rockies if you're thinking about her all the time and dreaming——"

"Couldn't have anything better to dream about, could I?" countered Roy. "But sh! If anyone's trying to get the bronses we don't want to broadcast to them that we're coming."

Under cover of the darkness the X Bar X boys went cautiously out from their improvised shelter and started for the place where they had tethered the bronses, a hundred yards or more away, in the middle of a small grove of aspens.

Feeling their way, step by step, in the night blackness, and stopping every few feet to listen, they had gone half the distance when Teddy grasped Roy excitedly by the arm.

"Sh! There they are! I told you I heard someone! They're right by the bronses now. Hurry!"

There was a breaking of twigs and branches in the aspen grove and a shuffle of feet. Then came a shrill, frightened whinny from Star, a noise that the bronco always made when a stranger was near.

Peering through the darkness, to which their eyes had now become a little accustomed, the Manley boys could dimly discern the forms of two men in the grove, who seemed to be trying to loosen the halters by which the ponies were tethered to the trees.

"Hey, you! Quit that and get out!" shouted Roy suddenly. "If you don't we'll fire. We've got you covered. Beat it!"

The men, evidently surprised at being discovered, seemed at a loss to know what to do for a moment, and stood without moving.

"Shoot 'em, Ted." Roy called loudly so that the men

could hear. "Don't stop to parley. Horse thieves are always shot and then tried afterwards. Let 'em have it!"

Crack! Bang!

Knowing that Roy only wanted to frighten the men, Teddy fired both barrels into the air.

The effect was instantaneous. The men leaped forward in terror and dashed away. The boys could hear them crashing through the undergrowth, stumbling and falling in their haste to get away as quickly as possible.

"Let 'em have it again for good luck," Roy commanded.

Bang! Bang!

This time Teddy did not fire into the air, but fired low in the direction the men had gone. The bullets zipped and tore through the underbrush, stripping the leaves from the bushes, but aside from frightening the men further, did no damage.

Teddy and Roy hurried forward and were quieting the broncos that, because of the presence of the marauders and the noise of the firing, had become terrified.

"Gosh!" Teddy's eyes blazed. "A horse thief is the meanest kind of a thief, isn't he, Roy? Wish I had hit one of those waddies!"

"You're right!" answered Roy, as he patted Star's neck soothingly. "Wish we could get those fellows."

"We will, or I'm a dodo bird!" exclaimed Teddy excitedly. "Say, I bet those are the same two that passed us in such a hurry!"

"Shouldn't wonder. They looked bad enough to do anything." Roy was examining the duffel bronco to see if anything had been taken.

"Everything's here. We got to them just in time. It was lucky that we——"

"We!" Teddy spoke sarcastically. "If it hadn't been for me we'd have lost the three broncs and the grub too."

'Oh, no,' says he, 'there's nobody around. It's only the fruit cake that you ate for supper,' " and Teddy grinned delightedly.

"We'll have to guard the broncos after this," observed Roy, pretending not to have heard the last part of Teddy's comment. "It isn't safe merely to leave them tethered. We'll take turns in keeping watch."

"Me for the first watch," said Teddy eagerly. "Don't feel a bit sleepy. You go to bed, Roy, and dream of Nell again. Maybe she'll tell you if we're lost or not."

Roy aimed a playful blow at his brother, which Teddy dodged, and then both boys settled themselves to watch the remainder of the night, for neither of them felt like sleeping.

Early the next morning the boys started again, after having consulted their map and being sure as they could be that they were going, at least, in the right direction. As they followed the trail and came into an open space for a few minutes, Roy looked anxiously at the sky.

"Don't like the looks of it, Ted," he announced after a few minutes' observation. "Looks to me as if there's a big storm brewing."

Teddy, too, scanned the sky carefully. It was overcast with a mass of steely-grey clouds, over which the wind was whipping long strings of fluffy white vapour. These outriders of a storm scurried like frightened sheep across the sky, and the wind came in a low, moaning sound that became a dull roar as it bent and shook the tall pines and hemlocks which grew in great profusion on all sides of the trail.

"Guess you're right," he said at last. "Does look as if we were in for it. But you never can tell how soon it will strike. Sometimes it's hours in coming. We might as well start. Don't you think so, Roy? We don't want to lose too much time in getting to Bitter Rock Creek."

"Sure. The country probably won't be any worse a

few miles farther on than it is here. When the storm comes, like as not, we'll find a place of shelter. There isn't any right here."

The boys started with Roy ahead and Teddy leading the duffel horse by a rope tied to the saddle. Progress was slow, as the trail at that point was narrow, and the clouds soon became so low-hanging that the atmosphere had the appearance of twilight.

"Gosh!" Teddy gave Roy a quick glance. "Something's going to happen soon around here. Wish we could find a ledge to get under, but there isn't one in sight."

"We'll find one soon," answered Roy confidently. "If we don't, we'll get wet, that's all. It won't be the first time."

The wind increased to almost hurricane velocity and came roaring and beating through the trees. The upper spaces of the sky, of which the boys could occasionally catch a glimpse between the bending branches, were filled with long ridges of black clouds, winging their way towards the east like gigantic bats.

With a squeak of fright, a rabbit scuttled in front of the boys, looked at them an instant with terror-stricken eyes, then darted into a mass of brush. Two foxes, seeking shelter from the coming storm, broke on to the trail, barked sharply, then, too, crashed away. A flock of crows, carried against their will on the wings of the wind, cawed loudly as they swept by.

Teddy's face was sober.

"Everything is scared out of its wits, Roy. First thing we know we'll——"

"Everything except us!" interrupted Roy, who could see that Teddy was beginning to be a little nervous. "We'll buck it all right. But whatever happens, Ted, keep hold of the broncs. If they should get away and we couldn't find them, we'd be done for."

Then pandemonium broke loose! With a shriek and scream of the wind, the storm was upon them. The rain came in great, slanting sheets, making a wall of water that shut out everything else from the boys' view.

Never before had they experienced such a storm! The rain beat and battered them fiercely from all sides. Small twigs and leaves, torn from the trees by the force of the storm, whipped and cut their faces and lashed at them savagely.

Teddy wound his fingers into Flash's mane and clung for his life. The pony, frightened and bewildered at the onslaught of the storm, plunged and reared, then struggled on, slipped and fell to his knees, then regained his feet again as Teddy steadied him by pressure on the reins.

The rope that led the duffel horse slipped, and the bronco, suddenly released, stumbled and fell to the ground.

Where was Roy? In the teeth of the gale Teddy could not see a foot ahead of him. Several times he shouted, but in the roar of the wind and the rain his voice could not be heard had Roy been almost at his side.

As blast after blast of wind and rain beat against him, Teddy almost collapsed. But the Manley blood was in his veins, and that never gave up. Gritting his teeth and crouching lower over the bronco's neck, Teddy urged him forward.

There was a crash like the report of a cannon. A great booming sound as if the sky had suddenly fallen in, and a great tree-top was torn off and hurled to the ground. It crashed within a few feet of Teddy, whirled for a moment, then toppled over to one side, just missing the boy.

All around could be heard, above the fury of the storm, the crash and smash of falling trees or of branches torn away when the trunk itself refused to

yield, and that tearing, grating sound that tells of a great monarch of the forest being twisted and uprooted.

Then, just before him, Teddy saw a moving object that made his heart leap and almost skip a beat. Roy! Crouched low upon Star's back, drenched and battered, almost bewildered! But alive!

Plunging and reeling in his saddle and almost being swept to the ground by the terrific wind, Teddy at last managed to bring Flash alongside of Roy. For a brief instant their hands met. Then they were torn away.

A white streak of lightning leaped across the sky cutting a jagged cleft in the darkness. A deafening crash of thunder that reverberated among the hills, until it seemed as if a thousand big guns were laying down a barrage! A frightened scream from Star, as the bronco, wild with terror and beyond control, leaped forward!

Was there no shelter to be found?

Chapter IX

IN MID-AIR

It seemed that all nature was bent on self-destruction. Flash after flash, shot the bolts of lightning, streaking across the sky with shimmering brightness, running jaggedly down in great forks of flame that split and splintered as the fiery bolts struck the tortured earth.

Boom! Crash! Smash! Bang!

The roar and rumble of the thunder never ceased for an instant and the volume of sound piled up, one peal after the other, until the air shivered and vibrated and seemed to shake the very foundations of the mountain.

In the continual blaze of light, Teddy Manley had ridden up close to Roy, and the two boys, holding in

check as best they could the terrified broncos, viewed with awe the play of the storm.

With a vicious whirling dash that brought a mass of twigs and leaves into the boys' faces, cutting and scratching them, the rain suddenly ceased, but the electrical part of the storm continued.

The boys started on again, hoping almost against hope that some shelter might be found.

Fifty, one hundred, one hundred and fifty yards had been covered when Roy, who was riding some distance in front of Teddy, pointed with his arms. No words could be heard amid the din of the thunder, which still rolled and boomed without a second's intermission, but Teddy sensed what his brother meant.

Just to the right of them loomed up a great expanse of blackness which, as the lightning came again, was shown to be a long, overhanging rock or cliff, evidently the entrance to a cave.

Shelter at last!

Urging their broncos forward, the boys rode under the rocky covering just as the storm resumed its fury.

Rat-a-tat-tat-tat-tat!

Down came the hail in great round balls, striking the ledge above and making a racket that resembled the firing of a machine gun. All around, the leaves were stripped from the trees and mingled with the pieces of ice that made a wall of attack that would have been almost impossible to have withstood had the boys been in the open.

"Whew!" Teddy put his lips close to Roy's ear because of the racket. "Lucky we got in here just when we did or it might have been the end of the X Bar X boys!"

"I'll tell a maverick it would!" shouted back Roy. "Gosh, I'm some wet! There isn't a dry thread on me!"

"Same here!" Teddy pulled off his coat and looked

at it ruefully as little streams of water ran from the drenched garment. "And there is nothing dry on the whole mountain. Can't make a fire or——"

"Yes, we can!" Roy had been searching in the back of the cave during a flash of lightning, which was flow less incessant. "There's wood here, and it's dry. Probably some hunter brought it in just for us. We'll have a fire, Ted, before a grasshopper could jump."

The storm abated somewhat, and after the boys had carried a pile of the dry branches to the front of the ledge they had no trouble in kindling a fire that soon burned brightly.

"Peel off, Ted!" commanded Roy, as he began to strip off his wet clothes. "These things will never dry on us, and we've got a long way to go yet. Wish we had our duffel. Gosh!" Roy stopped suddenly and looked at his brother. "Where do you suppose Jack Forrester is in this storm? Suppose he got killed! Then our plans would all go flooey!"

"No, they wouldn't," asserted Teddy cheerfully. "In that case there'd be only two to sign the contract, Peter Ball and Dad. But I'll bet the old fellow is all right. He's been in storms before. Probably crawled in somewhere and is drier than we are right this minute. What's that?"

Teddy listened intently.

"Somebody or something's coming," he cried. "Get your gun, quick, Roy! Bet it's those waddies who were after the broncs!"

The boys sprang to the broncos, upon whose saddles the rifles were still fastened, and stood in readiness to repel any attack that might be made.

Thud! Thud! Pad! Pad! Thud!

The half-naked boys crouched deeper into the shadow of the rocks as the sound approached and waited with raised rifles for whoever was to appear.

Thud, thud, came the steps. Then, crackle, as the twigs broke under the impact of some heavy body.

"Ready, Ted? Don't let them get the drop on you, whoever it is," whispered Roy.

Then, with a clattering of hoofs, a much bedraggled, very weary bronco galloped up to the ledge and, seeing Flash and Star, stopped.

"Hooray! The duffel horse!" Both boys shouted their delight at the same instant. "Pretty well fagged out and cut up some," announced Roy, as he began to take the boxes from the bronco's back. "But everything is safe and dry, thanks to those tin cans, and I guess the bronc will come around all right after a rest."

"Talk about Elijah being fed by the ravens!" exclaimed Teddy in delight. "He's got nothing on us! Here we were stranded in the Rockies with nothing to eat, and along comes the bronco and brings it right to us. Good old Ned," and as Teddy began to rub the bronco's neck the animal whinnied softly.

After a good sleep and with their clothing dried, the boys were none the worse for their experience of the night before. Every vestige of the storm had disappeared. The sky was a turquoise blue and the air was crisp and bracing.

"Gosh, it's great to be alive to-day," sang Teddy, as he went from under the ledge into the bright sunlight in a search for water. "Hurry, Roy, and get that bacon fried. I could eat a whole bear right now if I had one, I'm that starved!"

Teddy, having found water, went to look after the broncos. Much to his relief, he found that the pack horse was in good condition.

"According to the map," observed Roy, after breakfast had been finished and the broncos saddled and ready to start again, "we are at 12-A and all we have to do is to take the first trail to the left, then the fourth to

the right, making a curve up the mountain and then into the valley to reach Bitter Rock Creek. Simple, isn't it?"

"Very!" Teddy was as much puzzled over the map as his brother. "It doesn't look as if we were going to get anywhere, Roy, if we keep on like this. The question is, where is Jack Forrester? We haven't seen a sign of him, and we must be getting pretty nearly into the heart of the Rockies. I had hoped to overtake him before we reached Bitter Rock Creek. We must have come faster than he could have come."

"You've said it!" Roy was a little anxious because they had failed to find any trace of the missing prospector. "If Jack had come this way we certainly ought to have found some clue; found a trace of where he had camped, or something. Well, all we can do is to go ahead. We're on our way, but we don't know where we're going."

An hour later, slowly making their way over a trail that was strewn with wreckage from the storm, Teddy cried out excitedly:

"Clues, Roy! Footprints! A bronco's been along here! See!"

In the soft earth were unmistakable prints of a horse's hoofs, pointing in the direction in which the boys were proceeding.

"There were two broncs!" asserted Roy, after carefully examining the prints in the mud. "Two different sets of shoes. See?"

Teddy nodded his head in assent.

"You're right," he said grudgingly. "If there were only one bronco it would probably be Forrester's, but since there are two, that lets him out."

"The horse thieves, most likely," ventured Roy. "We'll have to keep our eyes open to make sure that they don't get the drop on us."

"We'll drop them if we get the chance!" exclaimed Teddy, with anger. "The rascals! It was a low-down trick to try to get our brons, and I won't be satisfied until we get even."

Roy did not appear to be listening. He was looking out over the valley that showed green and verdant after the storm.

"Look, Ted!" he said eagerly. "Tell me if you see the same thing that I do."

Teddy looked where Roy pointed, then turned his gaze back on his brother.

"I don't see anything except trees and grass. What was it, Roy?"

"Right over there to the left! Can't you see a thin silver line that winds and curves like a snake? Look again!"

"Whoopce! Yip! Yip!" Teddy threw his hat into the air and danced for joy.

"Bitter Rock Creek, Roy! We're on the right trail after all. Come on!" and Teddy urged Flash forward.

Bitter Rock Creek, however, was miles below the trail on which the boys were riding. For several hours they tried to find the way down, over the mixed-up paths that crossed and recrossed one another, turned downward for a short distance, then ran upward again.

"Bitter Rock Creek is just a silver line and we don't seem to get any nearer," commented Teddy disgustedly, as the boys were eating their noonday meal. "Wish we had an airship, Roy, and could sail right over to the creek. Gosh, wouldn't that be great?"

"Sure." Roy grinned at his brother's imagination. "But as long as we haven't, we'll have to use the brons, and that won't be so easy. Wonder how far from here Tumble Mountain is."

"Tumble Mountain!" Teddy was pessimistic. "Looks

to me as if there weren't any such place. Wonder if Jack Forrester just gave it a name he'd made up."

"No, Dad was there," said Roy, "in the old days when he was looking for gold. He and Jack Forrester and Peter Ball. He described it to me pretty well before we left."

"Look anything like it around here?"

Roy scanned the landscape again, and his forehead puckered into a frown.

"Not exactly. He said there were great clumps of red oak interspersed with hemlock. But that's about the same as any mountain, as far as I can see. Oh, yes, he said that there was a rounded shoulder overtopped by a sharp peak and that along this higher peak were open places that showed yellow earth, where rocks had tumbled down after a landslide."

"There it is!" Teddy was excited. "Look over north, Roy, away up. That's just such a place as Dad described. It's Tumble Mountain, I'm sure."

"Guess you're right." Roy was even more excited than his brother. "That's Tumble Mountain, all right, I'll tell a maverick! Now, Ted, we've just got to go down to Bitter Rock Creek and then follow it up to Tumble Mountain, where we shall probably find Jack Forrester! I think the best plan is to disregard this map and just follow any trail that leads down to the creek."

"Good idea!" Teddy was ready to assent to anything that looked like action. "Bet this old map was made in the year one. There've been a thousand trails cut since then."

"All right, we start!" and Roy, urging Star forward, led the way.

As the trail narrowed and curved around several wicked-looking cliffs, the boys dismounted and proceeded on foot, letting the broncos follow them, picking their own way as best they could.

On a certain perilous descent Roy, thinking that the path led straight ahead, began to hurry a little. The trail, hidden by bushes, turned sharply at a right angle. Unable to stop himself in time, Roy shot forward over the edge of the cliff. For a moment he seemed poised in air, then as he hurtled downward he was caught by a sharp, projecting limb of a tree that grew out over the ravine.

There was a ripping sound as the limb caught in Roy's shirt, and for an instant it appeared as if the boy would plunge headlong. But the stout cloth held, and Roy hung suspended over the abyss, with a sheer drop of three hundred feet in prospect, if the shirt did not hold.

Chapter X

RATTLESNAKES

Even in his perilous position, Roy Manley thought of his brother's safety.

"Ted!" he shouted, and the sound of his voice made the branch on which he was impaled shake and quiver. "Look out! The trail breaks right here. I fell over and a tree caught me! Don't come too near the edge!"

At the sound of his brother's voice, coming from he did not know where, Teddy walked carefully until he came to the spot where Roy had fallen off.

Looking over the edge, he could see Roy dangling on the branch, not daring to move lest the cloth rip or the branch break and he be precipitated into the chasm that yawned to receive him.

"Here I am, Ted. Up in a crow's nest!" called Roy, as he saw Teddy peer down at him. "Great view up here, but the question is how long I can stay."

"Jumping crickets, you're certainly in a fine mess!" Teddy was aghast at his brother's peril. Poised as he was between earth and sky, how was he to get down without crashing?

"Keep as still as you can, Roy," he shouted. "Don't move or wriggle, and maybe you won't fall. I'm going back to the duffel horse and get a rope. Won't be gone a minute."

Left alone, Roy Manley took stock of the situation. The branch had pierced the back of his shirt between the shoulders, going through the cloth twice in the manner of a stick-pin. Even if the cloth did not tear, any movement on Roy's part was likely to force the sharpened point of the branch away and allow him to fall.

Hanging as he was face downward, it was impossible for him to use his arms to catch hold of the branch from which he swung, and even should he do so, the chances were that it would break off. Knowing that there was nothing he could do to aid himself, he must rely on Teddy. But what could his brother do to help him out of his predicament?

After what seemed an endless wait, Roy saw 'Teddy peer again over the top of the cliff. He had a rope in his hands which he was coiling for a throw.

"Listen, Roy!" he shouted. "I'm going to try to throw the rope over the top of the tree, then let it hang down so that you can get hold of it, and put it around your shoulders. Savvy?"

Roy did not think 'Teddy's plan would work, but something had to be done before the branch cracked.

"All right," he shouted back. "Only don't sway the tree too much or I'll be shaken loose."

Swish!

The rope flew through the air and missed the tree by a foot. Another try, and it caught in the upper branches.

As Teddy pulled it free, the branch from which Roy was suspended shook and trembled and seemed about to break.

"Look out, Teddy. Gee! I nearly fell off that time. Guess you can't make it."

"Yes, I can." Teddy whirled the rope around his head and let it go again. This time it slid over the upper branch and down so that Roy could almost get it, but not quite.

"Ripple it," he called, as the rope dangled beyond his reach. "That's it. Just a little bit more. I've got it. Hurrah!"

Roy grasped the rope and, making a noose, slipped it over his shoulders. Not a moment too soon was this done. The exertions caused the shirt to tear away from the branch which held it, and the limb itself broke and fell to the rocks below.

Roy swung in mid-air and seemed in a more desperate position than before; but finding that the rope had caught firmly on the upper limb and was held tightly by Teddy's grasp of it, he climbed up hand over hand until he was astride a stout branch nearly at the top of the tree.

"Safe!" Teddy almost let go of the rope in his excitement.

"Sure!" called back Roy. "Good cool place to spend the summer, isn't it? How do you suppose I'm going to get out of this crow's nest?"

"You'll have to swing for it," said Teddy after a moment's reflection. "I can let out the rope considerably, and you can swing towards the cliff."

"It isn't long enough. I'll never get there." Roy was quite sure.

"I've another rope," said Teddy confidently. "When you swing out I'll lasso you and pull you in. It will be very simple."

"All right, I'll try. But it doesn't look good to me. Ready, Ted?"

"Ready," and Teddy began to loosen the rope that he held.

Roy slipped down several feet until he dangled about the height of the ledge.

"Now swing out," Teddy commanded, with the other rope ready to throw.

Roy swung out. Not far the first time, then a greater distance the second. Then he started on his long swing.

"Quick, Ted," he shouted. "The rope is wearing away up above. The branch is cutting it. Throw the other rope!"

Swish! Zip!

The rope sailed through the air straight to its mark. It fell gently over Roy's shoulders, and then tightened as Teddy pulled.

Roy had nearly swung to the edge of the cliff, and Teddy's pull on the second rope landed him upon it with a thud. As he struck, the first rope, cut by the sharp branches, parted.

"Gosh!" Roy sat upon a log and rubbed his shoulders where the ropes had bruised them. "Never thought I'd be hung!" Then his face grew serious.

"You saved my life, Ted!"

"It was a close call," commented Teddy. Now that it was all over and Roy was safe, he felt a little shaky and sat down beside Roy on the log.

"I'll tell a maverick!" exclaimed Roy. "Let's rest awhile before we go on. I feel a little woozy."

"Same here," and Teddy stretched himself lazily in the sun.

After a rest of an hour the boys felt better and, mounting, started on their way again. They were in a hurry to get down to Bitter Rock Creek, that they might follow it upward to Tumble Mountain.

"Whew! This is the worst trail I was ever on!" *exclaimed* Teddy, as Flash slipped and stumbled over the rocks that were scattered along the path, "If we don't find Forrester before long our shoes will be worn out and the broncs lamed for life. Careful, Flash!" as the pony stumbled again and nearly went to his knees. "Reckon we'd better walk again for a way," and Teddy reined in the bronco and got down from the saddle.

"It's sure a steep path, but it takes us down all right, and that's what we want. Wow!" and Roy, losing his footing, slipped and slid over the sharp stones and landed with a thud against a tree.

"Did you say going down?" Teddy grinned at his brother, as he, too, picked his way along the path and nearly fell on top of Roy at the end. "Sorry the elevator isn't running to-day."

"Where did you ever see an elevator?" countered Roy, holding on to a tree to keep from slipping farther. "Guess you mean a grain elevator, don't you?"

"Ha, ha! I guess you forget, Mr. Manley, that I attended the great and glorious Hopper Boarding School, in which tall structure of four stories there was an elevator that you could work with a rope! Many a time I've been stuck——"

"Same here," laughed Roy. "Got in-between two floors once and had to stay there an hour before they could get the foolish thing started. But, Ted, this is getting serious. It looks as if nobody had been here for a year. Maybe it leads to Bitter Rock Creek, but——"

Roy did not finish. He slipped again and started down the trail at a headlong rate, with Teddy following close behind.

"Come on, broncs!" called Teddy, as the ponies whinnied and seemed about to hang back. "Nice green

grass down here for supper, if you like that sort of thing.”

Stumbling and slipping, almost falling at times along the rough and winding trail, the boys went on. Oftentimes it was necessary to grasp at stumps and branches to keep them from going too fast. Their hands were scratched, arms lame, legs weary.

But the goal drew nearer, and the thin silver line expanded into a gleaming ribbon as Bitter Rock Creek was just below.

Going down a particularly steep place, with the broncos picking their way cautiously in the rear, Roy suddenly stumbled and pitched forward.

“Roy, look out!” Teddy was just behind and tried to get hold of his brother. But Roy was going too swiftly at that moment to be detained, and pulled away from the boy’s grasp.

“Wow! I’m coming, too,” and Teddy pitched after his brother, turning head over heels on his way down.

Where the boys struck there was a thick mound of pine needles that broke the force of their fall. With a bounce, both rolled and skidded into a small cave, whose yawning opening was just in front of them.

Bump! Thud! Thud!

The boys shot into the semi-darkness of the cavern, and stopped suddenly as they struck a pile of soft earth.

“Whew!” Roy sat up and looked around. “Some bump, I’ll tell a maverick! Are you hurt, Ted?”

Teddy was rubbing his knees that had been bruised by the slide.

“No, only bumped a little. Seem to have enough tumbles lately, I——”

Teddy stopped suddenly and his eyes grew big as he exclaimed:

“Jumping crickets, Roy! Look there!”

Between the boys and the mouth of the cave, and over which they must have passed in their swift slide, was a mass of moving and wriggling objects.

"Rattlers, as sure as I am born!"

Chapter XI

THE ESCAPE

The snakes had evidently crawled into the cave and bunched themselves together to keep warm, as the spring was a late one that year and the nights frosty.

"Look at 'em! Rattlers; and big ones, too. Hundreds of 'em, I reckon. Whew!"

They were in one jumbled-up mass, coiled around each other, and the boys' sudden slip over them had roused and angered the reptiles.

Although they had been disturbed, the snakes were not yet fully awake. While in that squirming mass, one after another would lift a head and shoot a fiery glance with their reddish-yellow eyes, then drop lazily back and apparently go to sleep again.

"Must be thousands of them," whispered Teddy, quivering with excitement. "Never saw so many snakes in my life, Roy. Gosh! There's millions!"

Roy smiled at Teddy's exaggeration.

"Not quite as many as that, Ted, but enough to make things uncomfortable. Looks as if we would have a nice little time getting out of here. Hope they don't start anything until——"

Br-r-r——

There was a loud whir, that deadly, rattling sound that both boys had heard before, right at Teddy's side.

Thud! Smash!

Roy brought his rifle down on the rattler's head just as the snake raised it to strike.

Teddy, however, grew deathly pale and drew back his hand.

"Guess you're too late, Roy," he mumbled. "He got me!"

Roy kicked the still-squirming snake away and bent over his brother.

"I hit him before he could strike," he said. "He couldn't have bitten you, 'Ted."

"Did, though." Teddy lifted his hand, on the back of which was a thin red scar.

As he saw it, Roy's heart almost skipped a beat. What if Teddy had been bitten by a rattler? They were alone in the heart of the Rockies. No help could be summoned in time. It would mean that Teddy——

A sudden picture came before Roy's eyes that caused him to shudder and grow sick. He saw himself lifting the unconscious Teddy to the back of a bronco and dashing madly through the perilous trails. Saw Teddy dying before help could be reached. Pictured the long days and nights that must follow before he could arrive at the X Bar X. The horror of it all! The ranch without Teddy in the days to come! No, it could not be!

With a start Roy came back to the present. The snakes in the mass by the entrance to the cave were beginning to squirm and wriggle once more. Every few seconds a head would dart up angrily from the jellylike mass until, in the dim light, it appeared to be an enormous, hydra-headed serpent that was looking eagerly for its prey.

Teddy was breathing hard, and his face was ghastly in the misty light.

"Guess he hit me just a second before you struck," he explained. "Didn't think he could be so quick, but it was just like lightning."

Roy had a sudden inspiration.

"Show me your hand, Ted," he snapped. That snake had not had time to bite Teddy, he was quite sure. "Here," and Roy pulled a flashlight from his pocket. "Let me see."

Teddy uncovered his hand and showed the thin, red scar. Roy looked at it closely for a moment, then he grinned.

"That isn't a snake bite," he said, with conviction. "It's a briar scratch you got, Ted, and you just noticed it. This kind of snake doesn't bite first and rattle afterward. I hit that fellow before he got through rattling. Gosh, but I'm glad! Snap out of it, Ted. You're all right!"

Teddy, still looking at his hand, was loath to believe that he had not been bitten. At last, however, as the red line did not grow and there was no pain, he concluded that his brother must be correct.

"Those rattlers are getting mighty nervous," Roy said, picking up Teddy's rifle which the boy had dropped and handing it to him. "There's going to be something doing in about a minute. Looks as if we would have to fight our way out. But can we get over them without being bitten?"

Teddy was himself again and eager for the fray.

For a minute or two the boys gazed fascinated at the squirming, wriggling mass that was beginning to disintegrate itself into separate snakes. Then, hardly daring to move lest they precipitate a fight, the boys held a council.

"We can shoot a lot of them," said Teddy eagerly, looking at his gun to see that it was loaded. "We can fire quick and often and kill a lot of them. What do you think, Roy?"

"They've got the bulge on us," said Roy slowly, never taking his eyes from the snakes. "They're right at the

entrance of the cave, and if we make a dash for it one of them will be sure to hit us."

"Snakes to the right of us, snakes to the left of us, snakes in front of us rattle and hiss," paraphrased Teddy, with a grin. "We've got to get 'em, Roy, or they'll get us. Let's shoot."

"All right!" Roy was a little dubious of the success of their plan, but it was the only thing to be done.

"Fire and load and fire again, as fast as you can," he counselled. "We'll account for some of them, anyway. Ready, Ted?"

"Ready!" Teddy raised his rifle.

Crack! Crack! Bang! Bang! Crack!

The two boys fired at the same time and reloaded as rapidly as possible.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

The noise from the guns in the narrow confines of the cave was deafening. The acrid smoke from the exploded shells hung heavily in the close, damp air of the cavern. The boys could not see a foot ahead of them.

Were the rattlers killed! Were they charging for the boys in the darkness? The X Bar X boys did not know. Teddy was sure that he felt them wriggling about his legs and expected any minute to feel their fangs in his flesh.

"Shoot again, Ted!" shouted Roy, gasping hard for breath. "It's our only chance. Gosh! This smoke is terrible!"

Again the guns spoke. Once more the air was stifling with the choking smoke. The roar of the guns sounded like thunder as the rocky walls of the cave echoed it again and again.

Rumble! Thump! Crash! Thud!

"The cave is falling in!" cried Teddy in alarm, as the back portion of the cave began to crumble and topple inward, shaken by the vibrations.

A crack appeared in what seemed to have been solid rock. The light streamed in, and a breath of cool air came to the gasping boys.

"We're saved!" Roy shouted joyously, as pieces of rock showered about them. "Quick, Ted! Get through the back. The hole is big enough. We don't have to go over those rattlers after all!"

Dodging the falling pieces of rock, the boys climbed through the crevice that had been made. It was difficult work, but it led to safety. Their hands were cut and bleeding from the jagged edges of the stones and their clothes were torn. But at last they wormed their way through and stood in the open air once more.

"This air is certainly great!" Teddy inhaled it in long mouthfuls. "I wonder what happened to the rattlers. Let's look over the top of the cave, Roy, and see."

The boys made their way carefully to the top of the cave, and, lying down on their stomachs, wriggled to the edge.

Below them they saw a strange sight. The snakes, instead of making for the back of the cave, as the boys had feared, had evidently decided to withdraw. The ground in front of the cave was filled with a mass of snakes, rattling and hissing and wriggling off as fast as they could.

In a few minutes there came the shrill, frightened cry of the broncos, and the boys could hear them crashing through the undergrowth as the snakes came upon them.

"They're chasing the broncs!" cried Teddy wildly. "We've got to get down there and save them!"

"Come on!" Roy was already slipping and sliding down a narrow path that led to the trail below. After him went Teddy, and in a few minutes the X Bar X boys were on the spot where they had landed from their fall. The ponies were not in sight.

"Come on!" Teddy dashed through an opening in the

brush that had been made by the frightened animals. "Look out for snakes, Roy. Maybe a few are left around here."

The boys could hear the crashing of the horses some distance to the left as they out-distanced the rattlers, and they hastened forward over the rock-strewn ground, which hurt and tortured their feet.

"There's Star!" shouted Roy in delight, as he saw the bronco standing beside a tree, head uplifted and eyes flashing with fright. "Flash, too," he added, as Teddy's pony came in sight. "Gosh, but I'm glad they're all right. Not bitten once," he announced as he looked the ponies over. "We're certainly lucky, Ted, to come out of this as well as we have."

"I'll say so!" Teddy was rubbing Flash's neck and quieting the pony that was still breathing heavily. "But, Roy, where's the duffel bronc? We've forgotten him!"

"I guess he's around somewhere," responded Roy. "We'll find him soon, I reckon."

The two boys searched for more than an hour, but the bronco on which the provisions were loaded could not be found. At last, tired from their exertions, they slumped down on a rock. Roy's eyes grew sober.

"We'll be in a nice mess," he said slowly, "if we can't find that bronc. We'll have nothing to eat, and it will probably be some days before we catch up to Forrester."

"I'm half starved now," replied Teddy mournfully. "I could eat a boiled owl this minute if I had one. What shall we do, Roy?"

"Don't know. We've just got to find that bronc, I suppose. Though search me if I know where to look for him!"

Chapter XII

HANDS UP!

Bang!

Teddy Manley suddenly brought his rifle to his shoulder and fired.

"I got him!" he exclaimed. "Lucky shot!"

"Got whom?" His brother had not seen anything and wondered what Teddy was firing at.

"You'll see!" Teddy dashed into the bushes and returned holding a rabbit by the ears. "Now for a nice rabbit stew. Guess we won't starve."

"Huh! How do you get that way? Can't make a stew without something to make it in. Want to use your hat? All the pots and pans are on the duffel horse."

"We'll roast him, then, over the fire," asserted Teddy, drawing his knife and beginning to skin the rabbit. "Roast rabbit is fine, and maybe we can find some berries."

The boys soon had a fire and the rabbit was put on a forked stick that served for a spit and turned until it was roasted brown.

"It isn't bad," said Teddy, as he cut a piece with his knife. "Would be better, though, if we had some salt," and the boy looked sharply up and down the trail as if he expected the duffel horse would put in an appearance with the necessary condiment.

"I'm afraid he's fallen over a cliff and got killed," said Roy dubiously. "But we'll start again and see if we can find him. We won't give up."

After they had eaten and taken a brief rest, the X Bar X boys began a further search for the missing

bronco. They had not gone far before Roy gave a shout of delight.

"He went this way! See, Teddy!" and Roy picked from a bush a piece of red paper that had been around a can of crackers. "Hurrah! Maybe we won't starve after all, Ted!"

"Never thought we would," asserted the matter-of-fact Teddy. "That bronc is around here somewhere, that's certain, and we'll find him sooner or later."

"There's another piece of paper," called Roy, who was riding ahead. "We're getting warm, I'll tell a maverick!"

For the next hour, however, the young searchers could find no more clues as to the whereabouts of the missing animal. Down and down the boys went, making their way carefully over the rocky trail until at last they came to the roaring waters of Bitter Rock Creek.

"What a view!" Teddy was impressed by the grandeur of the scene. "Never saw anything like it before, did you, Roy?"

Roy did not answer, but stood gazing at the beautiful vista before them.

Almost at their feet rushed the waters of the creek, sparkling and leaping over white stones that glistened and shone in the bright sunlight. On all sides rose the mountain peaks, towering to the skies, their thickly wooded slopes rising almost perpendicular in places, and forming a natural frame for the shimmering water.

"The heart of the Rockies!" murmured Roy, at last. "Looks as if we were a million miles from nowhere. Gosh, it's good to be here, Teddy!"

Just then an eagle screamed from a pinnacle high above them and started to wing its way across the blue. Teddy raised his rifle to fire, then put it down again.

"He's king here," he said softly, "and I guess we don't want to hurt him, do we, Roy?"

Roy shook his head.

"No," he said. "I only wish we could fly like he does. Then we might be able to find the bronc. If we don't get him soon it's going to be serious."

Teddy had laid down his rifle and taken the glasses from his belt and was looking through them.

"Roy," he cried excitedly. "There's something moving away up the creek. It looks like—it is a horse!"

Roy glued his eyes to the binoculars and looked in the direction that Teddy indicated.

"Sure looks like one," he admitted. "And, Ted, look! He's got a load of things on his back. It's Ned, the duffel horse!"

Teddy was dancing up and down he was so excited.

"That's him," he cried, reckless of his grammar. "But he's a long way off. I hope he doesn't lose himself before we can catch up with him."

The boys urged their ponies forward up the trail, but soon came to a blank rock where the path ended.

"We'll have to make a detour," announced Roy disgustedly. "There must be a path around somewhere. Think I saw one a short way back."

They retracted their way a short distance, and the trail that Roy had mentioned was discovered. Around and around it curved, under great ledges of rock that looked as if they might topple over at the slightest touch, and shrouded by thick masses of trees that prevented the boys from keeping the missing bronco in sight.

At last the trail straightened and led once more to the shore of Bitter Rock Creek.

"See him, Roy?" asked Teddy anxiously, as they came out into an open space. "Whew, it would be a shame if we lost him now!"

"Not a sign. But we'll follow the creek up and we ought to reach the place where we saw him last."

For half a mile the boys made their way alongside

of the creek, then Roy, who was riding ahead, drew rein.

"Sh!" he whispered as Teddy came up. "There are two fellows just ahead. I bet it's those waddies we saw the other night. Yes, it is, and they have the bronc!"

The boys rode into the shelter of a copse of trees. Just ahead they could see, in the middle of a small grove, two men who had roped the duffel horse and were busy unloading some of the boxes he carried.

"Gosh!" Teddy was too angry for words. "Let's ride in and shoot them down, Roy!"

Roy advised caution, and the boys rode slowly on until they could hear the murmur of voices.

"Whew, but they're ugly-looking customers! Bet we'll have to fight to get that bronc away!" exclaimed Roy, as he studied the two rough-looking men.

The men were talking loudly, apparently oblivious of the fact that someone might hear them.

"We're in luck, Chick," said one hoarsely. "Grub was getting low, but this bronc is loaded to the hilt. Reckon he strayed away from those Manley kids in the storm. Let's have a feed right now!"

"I'm for it, Stubby!" The man spoke in a gruff voice and his tight lips opened with a grin, showing a row of ugly-looking teeth. "Haven't had such luck since we rustled those cattle last year."

"I know who they are!" whispered Teddy excitedly. "That short waddy is Stubby Conners. He used to work for Peter Ball a few years ago, and Peter fired him for being drunk. The tall fellow is Chick Harrison. I've seen him loafing around Eagles!"

"We'll have enough grub now to last us until we find Jack Forrester," asserted Stubby, his mouth full of a piece of Mrs. Manley's cake. "The old duck ought to be around here, and when we find him we'll——" and Stubby shook his fists menacingly.

"I've got it!" Roy's eyes blazed. "They've caught on, somehow about the water-power plan, and they're hunting for Forrester, too. Bet they want to make some deal with him. But we'll queer their little game! Wait a bit, though, and maybe we'll find out more."

At that moment the duffel horse raised its head and looked expectantly in the direction of the boys. Then it gave a shrill neigh. There was an answering neigh from Flash and Star, and the two broncos lunged suddenly forward and galloped straight towards the other horse. Before the X Bar X boys could stop them, the two ponies had carried them up to where the two men were standing.

Surprised at their sudden appearance, the grubby-looking individuals were quick on the draw. Before the boys could reach for their rifles they found themselves looking into the muzzles of two big revolvers.

"Hands up!" commanded Chick. "We've got you kids where we want you. Make a move, and we'll drill you!"

Bang!

Despite the injunction, Teddy had reached for his rifle. The bullet zipped dangerously near his head, and he stayed his hand.

"Do as they say, Ted," commanded Roy. "They've got the drop on us. Up with your hands."

Teddy reluctantly raised his hands above his head, and Roy did the same.

"That's better!" Stubby chuckled evilly. "No funny business, or Bard Manley will lose some of his family."

"That's our horse! What are you doing with it?" cried Teddy angrily. "It belongs to us. We lost it!"

"Your horse!" Stubby's pock-marked face grew purple and his fiery red hair seemed to bristle with anger. "Who says it's your bronc? How do you get that way? We found it wanderin' down by the creek and we

claim it. Findin's keepin'. So ride away, kids, and don't look for trouble."

"I know you," came back Teddy, his voice rising in his excitement. "You're the waddy that got into trouble with Peter Ball. I'd know your ugly face anywhere."

"What's the game about Jack Forrester?" asked Roy suddenly. "Looking for him, are you? Well, so are we, and when we find him your goose will be cooked. You can't beat us, Chick, and you might as well turn over that bronc. He's ours and we mean to have him. Savvy?"

At the mention of Forrester, the two men looked at each other in surprise. It was just the distraction that Roy had counted on. His hands descended quickly and almost reached his gun. But Chick was quicker.

Bang! Zip!

A bullet cut through the air and ripped a hole in Roy's hat. With a grin of defiance, his hands went up again.

Chapter XIII

THE BOYS SCORE AGAIN

Chick Harrison's face was livid.

"You little dumb-bell!" he shouted. "Do you think you can get away with anything like that? Reach for your gun, will you? Try that nonsense once more and we'll be able to see daylight through you. Understand?"

"Sure, I understand." Roy's face was pale but his voice was calm. "You've stolen our bronc with the supplies, and you've got the drop on us. We haven't a chance right now, and you're not nœn enough to put up a fair fight. That's the situation, isn't it?"

Chick's teeth clicked and his eyelids narrowed.

"You don't git anywhere with your high-toned talk,"

he said surlily. "We've got you goin' an' comin', an' you know it. Now ride away like good little boys."

"You're not goin' to let 'em go, afe you?" asked Stubby, anxiously. "Best pot 'em off an' be done with it. We don't want any tattle-tales runnin' around tellin' all that's happened and a lot that hasn't."

Chick's eyes grew troubled, and he hesitated.

"Never did bump anybody off yet," he said slowly, "an' don't reckon my neck's achin' for a noose. We've got 'em scared, Stubby, an' I don't think they'll bother us any more if we turn 'em loose."

"You're a fool!" asserted Stubby angrily. "Bet they'll queer us with Forrester some way or other."

"No, they won't." Chick was confident. "They don't know where he is, an' we do. They can't hurt us and I'm not goin' to git in wrong with the sheriff by puttin' a bullet through 'em. Beat it, boys, an' don't look back, or——" and Chick pointed to his revolver.

"Take their guns!" exclaimed Stubby. "Then we ain't got nothin' to fear."

"Have a heart!" exclaimed Roy. "How do you suppose we're going to live out here in the Rockies without firearms? We won't be able to get anything to eat, and lots of wild animals are around. Might as well shoot us and have it over with," and Roy scowled angrily at the two thieves.

"Reckon the kid is right," said Chick. "Can't get far in the Rockies without a gun. We'll follow 'em up the trail a piece an' see that they don't cut up any tricks. On your way!" and Chick motioned to the boys to go forward.

Teddy and Roy lowered their hands to the ponies' reins and the little procession started. Roy led, followed by Teddy. Chick and Stubby, their pistols drawn and ready for instant use if necessary, came next with the duffel horse straggling along behind.

A mile farther on, where the trail forked at a clump of red oaks, Chick ordered a halt.

"You leave us here," he said grimly. "Follow the trail to the north for a mile and it will bring you to the creek again. By that time we'll have gone. An' don't try to start anything," he cautioned, "or you'll git the worst of it. We're givin' you a chance to beat it and you ought to be thankful. Much obliged for the bronc and provisions," he added, with a grin. "Hope you don't have to diet too long."

"Start!" commanded Stubby, in a loud voice. "An' don't look back. If you do you may see somethin' that wouldn't please you. Now beat it."

The X Bar X boys started up the trail that the two men had indicated, and in a few minutes had passed from their view. They could hear the sharp clatter of the rascals' ponies on the lower trail as they cantered along with the duffel horse in tow.

"Whew!" Teddy drew rein and slumped low in the saddle. "What do you think of that? Robbed and ordered around as if we were a couple of babes in the woods. We've got to get even with those waddies, Roy, or die in the attempt."

Roy gritted his teeth and his eyes flashed fire.

"We will, and that isn't maybe. But we've got to be careful, Ted. If they get the drop on us again they won't hesitate to shoot. Believe me, they're both out for something in connection with Forrester and the water power company. We've got to find out what, and get to Jack before they do."

"You're right!" Teddy was convinced that the men must be taken seriously and it would be dangerous to temporise with them. "But what shall we do, Roy? We can't let them get away."

Roy thought deeply for a minute before he answered.

"We'll follow them!" he announced. "Probably have

to tether the broncs and go on foot. Don't want to have them give us away as they did this time. Reckon those waddies won't go far before they camp, as the sun will be going down soon, and most likely they'll be hungry again. We'll steal up and get the drop on *them* this time, I'll tell a maverick!" and Roy turned Star's head and prepared to double back on the trail.

It took some little time for the boys to reach the fork in the road where Chick and Stubby had parted from them, but at last they came to it, and started to trail the abductors of the duffel horse.

"We'll ride slowly so we won't come up to those waddies in daylight," said Roy. "They think we're scared half to death, and I don't believe they'll keep watch after dark. When they get to sleep we'll hop in and get the duffel bronc and beat it."

"Like to hang around for a while and listen to what they have to say," said Teddy. "Maybe we could get a line on where Forrester is. Then we could tie those fellows to a tree and get after Jack."

Roy looked at his brother admiringly.

"Gosh! First sensible suggestion you've made in a month. How does the boy do it? Life in the Rockies must be stimulating to the brain. If we stay here a month, perhaps——"

"Huh!" Teddy broke in disdainfully. "If it wasn't for me we wouldn't have come on this trip at all. Remember I proposed it, and you——"

"Whew! The air's too much for him already! Thought it was I who wanted to go after Jack! Well, anyway, we won't argue over it; while we're talking those fellows will be getting farther off. Wow, look there, Ted! We're right on their trail," and Roy pointed to the prints of horses' shoes in a place where the earth was soft.

For ten minutes the boys followed the trail on which

the tracks of the men's broncos showed plainly. Then they turned to the right and were lost in the coarse grass that grew in abundance on every side.

"Here's where we change from cavalry into infantry," said Teddy, pulling Flash up and jumping from the saddle. "We'll tie our broncos in that grove, Roy, and follow those waddies on foot. And we won't forget to take our guns along," he added, as he unstrapped the rifle from the saddle.

For a quarter of a mile the X Bar X boys plodded over stones and broken branches that made the travelling difficult, but they knew that they were going in the right direction from the trampled condition of the grass.

It soon grew dark, however, and all further trace of the two men was lost.

"Looks as if we'd lost them!" exclaimed Teddy, as he stubbed his toe on a protruding root and nearly fell. "Gosh! Just our luck! I believe—"

Teddy smoked and sniffed the air.

"Smoke!" he whispered excitedly. "They've lighted a fire, and can't be far off. We're right after them and—— There is a fire! I can see a glow. Come on, Roy, and mum's the word!"

The boys made their way carefully through the trees towards the dim light of a fire. As they neared it they flattened themselves against the ground and wriggled their way along until they came within hearing distance of the two men, who were sitting on a log smoking, evidently at peace with the world and least of all expecting an attack.

"Pretty slick in you, Chick," they heard Stubby say in his low, rumbling voice, "the way you handled them kids. Scared the life out of 'em when you fired through that feller's hat. Bet they're beatin' it as fast as they can ride."

"Haw, haw!" Chick laughed shrilly. "They'll go back to Bard Manley and give him a great song an' dance about how they were attacked by a couple o' wild men and couldn't find Forrester! Be a joke on Bard when we show up with Jack's sign on that paper that we've bought him out."

Teddy gripped Roy fiercely by the arm, and even in the darkness his eyes blazed.

"The rascals!" he whispered. "So that's their game, is it? We'll put the kibosh on that, and then——"

"Sh!" Roy was afraid the men would hear and he put his hand over Teddy's lips.

"Good thing we run into them hunters who gave us the low-down on Jack Forrester," went on Stubby. "Said they saw him grubbing for gold on Tumble Mountain, didn't they?"

"Yeah!" Chick Harrison's shrill voice carried well on the still night air. "He's up at an abandoned mining camp just beyond. Reckon he'll stay there some time. When we offer to buy his share of that ground, bet he'll fall hard."

"You bet he will!" rumbled Stubby. "Offer him ten dollars, an' he'll grab it quick. But say, Chick, I'm dead tired an' sleepy after that good feed we had. What say if we turn in?"

"I'm with you!" and Chick threw himself down on a pile of pine boughs.

In a few minutes both men were snoring loudly.

"Come on!" whispered Roy. "Now's our time! We'll get our stolen bronc and clear out of here!"

The boys crept forward silently in the darkness. It did not take long to locate the duffel horse that was tied with a rope a short distance from the camp fire, which had now died down.

Swish! With one slash of his knife Teddy cut the rope.

He had begun to lead the bronco away when something happened which the boys had feared.

The duffel horse, recognising his master, gave a sharp, shrill neigh of delight.

Chapter XIV

'TEDDY GETS A WETTING

The piercing scream of the pack horse cut through the quiet of the mountainside and awakened the echoes.

Nay—eee! N-a-y!

Again the bronco gave out its shrill note of welcome as the boys pulled it hurriedly along, stumbling and falling in the darkness.

"Gosh, if that isn't the limit!" whispered Teddy. "If this old brute had only kept still we'd have got away! But now——"

The snoring had suddenly ceased and in its place came loud cries of alarm from the ruddily awakened Chick and Stubby.

"Hey, Stubby, get your gun quick!" came the shrill voice of Chick. "Somethin's attackin'. Wildcat, I reckon. Heard it scream. Jumped over me and woke me up."

Bang! Bang! Crack!

The men blazed away in every direction, but the bullets whizzed harmlessly into the trees, none of them going near it's mark.

"Load up again, Stubby," commanded Chick. "My gun's jammed. Strike a light!"

"Aw, it was nothin'," the boys could hear Stubby growl. "Jest dreamin' you were, that's all. Shame to wake a feller up like that, because——"

Stubby struck a match which went out, then another

that shared the same fate. With the third he lighted a small pile of twigs which gave an uncertain blaze.

"Jest dreamin', eh?" shrilled Chick. "Like fun, I was! We've been nicked! That duffel nag is gone! Didn't break his halter, either! It's been cut!" and Chick exhibited the slashed end of the rope.

"It's them Manley kids again," bellowed Stubby, now thoroughly awake. "Told you not to let 'em go. An' one of us ought to have kept watch, but you would go to sleep. Now look what's happened!"

"Keep watch, my eye!" growled Chick. "It was you who proposed turnin' in, with your belly full of grub. I'd 'a' sat up all night if it hadn't been for you, you big stiff!"

Swat!

The boys could hear the blow that Stubby aimed at Chick Harrison. From the sound it evidently landed with telling effect, and Chick howled and swore loudly.

"Time to beat it," whispered Roy. "They'll catch on pretty soon which way we've come and give chase. Come ahead."

In the pitch darkness it was no easy matter to make headway and lead a nervous pony without making a noise. The boys soon found themselves crashing through the underbrush, which crackled and snapped as the bronco trampled it down.

"They've discovered which way we've come!" exclaimed Roy, as shrill yells came from the grove in which the duffel bronco had been picketed. "Now look out for fun! They won't give up very easily."

Bang! Crack! Crack! Bang!

Stubby and Chick were firing at random, but in the general direction that the boys had taken.

Zip! A bullet whizzed overhead and bit into a tree not far away.

Ping! Bing!

"They're getting the range," said Roy grimly. "Let's show 'em we're not dead ones, Teddy."

Crack! Bang!

The boys fired high in order not to hit the outlaws, but the effect was immediate. Chick and Stubby shouted wildly. Their broncos thrashed and plunged with fright as the bullets cut into the branches above and sent down a shower of leaves and twigs.

"Hustle while they're scared," advised Roy. "We ought to make a little time right now."

The X Bar X boys drove the pack horse towards the spot where they had left their broncos and made such speed that in a short time all sounds of Chick and Stubby were lost.

The boys found Star and Flash where they had left them. They mounted and rode cautiously till, in a short time, they found a camping place. After preparing and eating a good meal, they decided to call it a day.

"We ought to take turns watching, I suppose," yawned Teddy sleepily, "but I reckon those waddies won't be around this way again to-night."

"No chance!" Roy was positive. "Anyway, I can't keep awake to save my life. Hit the hay, Ted, and to-morrow will be another hard day."

The next morning the boys were up early. The day was a clear, warm one, and there were no signs of Chick or Stubby.

"We'll get to Forrester before they do, if we hurry," said Teddy, as the boys broke camp. "Wonder where that old mining camp is that those fellows spoke about. Perhaps we'll meet some men and we'll ask them."

"Sure! The trails are as crowded as Broadway," chuckled Roy, who always liked to tease his younger brother. "We'll ask a traffic cop, and he'll be sure to know!"

"Think you're smart, don't you?" snapped Teddy.

"We're just as likely to meet someone as those waddies are. Guess other folks besides us are in the Rockies!"

Roy grinned and hit Star a slap on the flank. The little pony loped forward, with Teddy on Flash following. Along the creek they went for some distance, then the trail swerved to the left and became lost in a maze of paths that twisted and curved in every direction.

"Gosh, Roy," exclaimed Teddy, as the trails grew more intricate, "we're losing valuable time. Those rascals may get ahead of us after all, I'm afraid!"

"You've said it!" Roy was a little discouraged. The boys had been out over a week and had found no trace of Forrester. With Stubby and Chick on the same quest, it was nip and tuck who should be the first to reach the much-sought-for mining prospector.

"Forrester told that fellow Palmer," said Roy suddenly, "that he was going to follow Bitter Rock Creek up to Tumble Mountain. Probably we'd better stick to the creek and follow it up and not go chasing off on any of these twisting trails."

"Good idea! Let's beat it for Bitter Rock," and Teddy turned Flash into a path that led downward.

In less than half an hour the gleaming waters of the creek could be seen through the leaves.

"Hurrah!" shouted Teddy, in glee. "Beat you to it, Roy. Bet Flash will get a drink before Star does!"

The boys raced down the trail and then out into the open. Teddy was in the lead, and as he neared the creek, the bank, which was soft and spongy, gave way under Flash's heavy pounding and both horse and rider pitched forward into the water.

The water of the creek was not rapid at that place, but looked dark and deep. Flash landed with a splash, and so unexpected was the plunge that Teddy slid over the bronco's head and down.

"Wow! Taking a bath, Teddy?" shouted Roy, as he jumped off Star and made his way cautiously to the water's edge. "How's the swimming out there?"

No answering call came from Teddy. Flash came up, snorting and splashing, shook his head, and started to swim ashore. But there was no Teddy.

Fear gripped Roy's heart, and for a second he felt weak.

"Teddy?" he shouted. "Where are you?"

Teddy's head appeared above the water. Just his head, above the still, dark water. Then it disappeared again. Roy pulled off his jacket and was about to plunge in when the head appeared again and Teddy, spluttering and blowing water from his mouth, looked towards the shore.

"My foot's wedged in between two logs and I can't get free," he called. "Wow, it's cold here! Hurry and help me out, Roy!" Then the head disappeared once more under the water.

Roy dived in and swam quickly to where he had seen his brother go down. As he came up, Teddy appeared again, gasping for breath. "It's holding me and I can't get away," he said. "Dive under, Roy, and see if you can pry me loose."

Roy dived, and found that Teddy's right foot was tightly held by a log that had become wedged between two rocks. He tugged and strained, but the log seemed securely fastened. As he came up for breath, Teddy was taking air again.

"Can't move it, Ted," said Roy. "But I'll get a rope and put it around the log and have Star pull it up. Won't be but a minute."

"Hurry!" Teddy was gasping and trying to keep his mouth out of the water. "Some cold in here," he managed to say, "but I'll keep up as long as I can."

Roy swam quickly to the shore, got the rope, and

swam back again. Then he dived and fastened one end of the rope to the submerged snag.

"I'll have you out in a jiffy," he encouraged Teddy, as he started towards the bank once more. "Don't swallow any more of the water than you can help."

Scrambling up the bank, he tied the rope to Star's saddle and urged the pony forward.

"Hurry up, old boy," he said, patting the bronco's neck. "We'll have 'Ted out in no time."

The pony started. He strained on the rope, which grew taut and swished through the water.

But Roy had not noticed a sharp, razor-like rock on the bank, over which the rope ran. Just as it seemed that the log was to be pulled up and Teddy released, the rope was sawed in two.

Star stumbled and fell to his knees as the strain was released, and Teddy's head disappeared once more beneath the water of Bitter Rock Creek.

Chapter XV

WHAT THE BOYS OVERHEAR

With a leap that made a dash of white spray rise high into the air, Roy Manley plunged into the creek and swam swiftly towards the spot where his brother had gone down.

What was he doing underneath those dark waters? Roy wondered. Had he become exhausted and given up or had that last jerk of the bronco pulled him down to his death?

With a sudden dive, Roy was under the water. Both boys were strong swimmers and had early learned to swim under water. But the water of Bitter Rock Creek

was muddy by reason of the storms that had churned into it the debris that had come sliding down from Tumble Mountain.

Roy could see only a few inches ahead of him, but he felt the form of his brother that seemed crouched on the bottom of the creek.

Throwing one arm around Teddy's shoulders, Roy pushed upward until the heads of both boys were above the surface of the water.

"Ted!" he shouted, although his lips were almost at his brother's ear. "Breathe! Get some air into your lungs! Don't give up!"

Teddy gasped, opening his mouth in the manner of a fish that had been taken from the water and was smothering in the air, and began to breathe. At first, only faint breaths, then, as the air began to revive him, he took long, deep ones.

"You're all right," Roy told him, when the boy opened his eyes. "Gosh! What made you go down like that when the rope broke?"

"Something pulled me," responded Teddy in a faint voice. "Something grabbed my leg and I couldn't help it."

"Suction, I guess, when the rope broke and the log slipped back into place," said Roy wisely. "Now, Ted, you keep your head above water for a few minutes more and then you'll be on the bank. Paddle with your hands and don't let your head go under. I'll splice the rope and have you out in no time."

It took Roy but a minute to find the broken rope and swim with it to the shore, where he spliced it to the piece that was still attached to Star's saddle.

"Steady now, little horse, and don't be in such a hurry as before," said Roy.

The pony seemed to know what was required of it. With a strong, long pull, the rope again tightened. The

bronco planted its forelegs firmly upon the trail, and started forward.

"It's giving!" shouted Teddy excitedly across the water as the log began to move. "A little more and I'll be free! Wow! You've done it, Roy!" and with a splash Teddy started to swim towards the shore.

"Can you make it, Ted?" called Roy anxiously, as he saw his brother moving slowly through the water. "Grab the rope and I'll pull you in."

"Hot dog!" Teddy caught the noose in the rope that had slipped off when the log was pulled up and put it around his shoulders.

"Pull for the shore, sailor!" shouted Roy, leading Star forward slowly, and soon drew the boy to the bank, up which Teddy scrambled.

"All tired out, Ted?" Roy put his arm around his brother and led him to a near-by log. "How do you feel?"

"Fine and dandy, thank you!" Teddy was a little shaky, but otherwise unharmed from his sudden plunge. "Told you Flash would get a drink before Star, didn't I?"

"You did. But I haven't seen the bronc indulging yet. Guess his bath was plenty without getting wet inside."

"Well, I'm wet outside," said Teddy, beginning to strip off his clothes and hanging them on the bushes to dry. "Gosh, but it was cold in that creek!"

While Teddy's clothes were drying the boys took a rest, and then started once more on their quest, which had been interrupted by Teddy's sudden plunge into the creek.

"Wonder if those waddies do know where Forrester is, or was that just a bluff?" Teddy wanted to know.

Roy shook his head.

"They weren't bluffing," he said. "Remember we

heard them talking about what the hunters told them before they knew we were around. There's nothing to do, Ted, but to keep on. Gosh, Bitter Rock Creek seems a million miles long! I wonder when we'll get to the end!"

"At the end of the rainbow lies a pot of gold," sang Teddy, having now fully recovered his spirits. "And at the end of this old creek lies Jack Forrester, only I hope he won't be lying when we find him. Gosh, Roy, suppose the old man should be too bunged up to go with us!"

"We'll load him on the duffel horse and bring him in," asserted Roy. "Now, one trail goes north-east and the other north-west," as they came to a fork in the path. "Which shall we take, Ted?"

"North-west. N.W. also stands for Nell Willis," suggested Teddy teasingly. "Can't do better than to follow the north-west trail, Roy. You ought to know that."

"We'll go north-west," decided Roy, his face growing red, as it always did when his brother teased him about Nell. "I believe our luck has turned. North-west it is!"

For more than a mile the boys toiled up the trail, which led alongside of rocky cliffs and between great clumps of trees, so closely grown together that the light of the sun was almost shut out.

"North-west is some trail!" observed Teddy, as they plunged onward. "Looks as if it led to nowhere!"

"Nowhere! Another N.W.," came back Roy, his eyes dancing with fun. "Two N.W.s ought to bring us double luck."

Luck, however, seemed to be slow in coming. The boys went on for another hour without the aspect of the trail changing in the slightest degree. Then Roy suddenly gave a loud shout.

"There it is, Teddy! Just ahead! Told you we'd have luck if we followed this trail!"

On the crest of a hill, in a little open space, was a long, low building constructed of logs. It had a crooked smoke-pipe that protruded from one end of the roof and two windows which at one time evidently contained glass, but now every pane was broken. The place had the appearance of being deserted, and the boys' hearts sank as they approached.

"Doesn't look as if anybody was at home," said Roy, as they began to climb the steep grade that led to the cabin. "Hello! What's that on the door, Ted?"

Teddy ran forward and read what was written on a piece of paper that was nailed to the door.

"He's left! Isn't that the limit!"

"What does it say? Let's read it!"

Teddy handed the paper to his brother, and Roy read:

"Have gone up the mountain.

J.F."

"Well!" Roy was not discouraged. "As long as we know where he's gone, we can follow him."

Teddy was tired after the long days of searching and irritated that when success seemed so near it should be snatched away.

"Sure," he grumbled. "Go all over Tumble Mountain looking for this fellow! Bet you Chick and Stubby reach him first and get him to sign a paper giving them his share to that land. Hot dog! We're always out of luck!"

"Not so much as you may think." Roy spoke soothingly, for he knew just how his brother felt. "There seems to be quite a wide trail leading up the mountain from here, and it's probable that Jack would follow that. Anyhow, Ted, it won't do any harm to go up it and see where it leads to."

The boys mounted their broncos once more and started up Tumble Mountain, in the direction that they thought Jack Forrester had gone.

"It's a long lane that has no turning," quoted Roy sagely, as the two ponies padded swiftly along on a carpet of pine needles.

"Turning!" Teddy was still disgruntled at not finding his man at the camp. "Never saw trails before that turned so much. Might be going back where we came from for all we know. N.W. trail hasn't brought us any luck yet, even if it does stand for Nell Willis!"

"Wonder what she's doing now," mused Roy. "I'll tell a maverick I'd like to see the kid again! But it's a million miles from Tumble Mountain to New York."

"Probably is married by this time," suggested Teddy, knowing that would tease his brother. "Can't depend on girls these days. Likely some New York fellow has——"

"Nell won't get married; not yet awhile, anyway," snapped Roy. "She told me so!"

"Oh, you asked her, did you? First I'd heard about it. Too bad she wouldn't have you. But never mind, when we get back I'll introduce you to a nice, fat girl at Eagles I know, and——"

Roy's face flushed and he was about to answer when he reined in Star suddenly, and put his hand on Flash's bridle.

"Sh! Hear anything? What was that?"

Teddy listened for a moment. Then his eyes grew big.

"Yes. Voices! Bet it's those waddies. Come on!"

The two boys jumped from the broncos and trailed the reins. Taking their rifles with them they hurried forward on foot.

They had not gone far before they heard the voices again, this time louder than before.

Dodging behind trees and keeping under the cover of the thick growth of brush, they soon came to a small grove. There, sitting on a rock, was a little old man whom the boys recognised as Jack Forrester by the scar on his cheek. Standing in front of him were Chick Harrison and Stubby Conners.

As the X Bar X boys approached, they heard the gruff, rumbling voice of Stubby.

"We'll raise the price to one hundred dollars, Forrester," he said. "Will you accept?"

Chapter XVI

THE BOYS SPOIL THE GAME

Jack Forrester's care-lined face lighted up and then his forehead puckered into a perplexed frown.

"Don't know what your game is, boys," he said warily. "But that old tract of land isn't worth more than ten cents. Why, Bard Manley, Pete Ball and me, we prospected all over it years ago and didn't find a dime's worth of gold; no sирee, not a cent's worth! Now you fellers come along and offer me a hundred dollars for it. What's the idee?"

"Nothing wrong, Mr. Forrester." Chick tried to speak casually. "Only my friend and I have a hunch that some day that old piece of land might sell—well, say for building lots, and we're willing to gamble a hundred on making a little money on it."

"Haw, haw, haw!" Forrester laughed immoderately. "Building lots! Who in the world is going to build 'way out there? Now tell me another, as the boys say!"

"Nevertheless, Mr. Forrester," rumbled Stubby, who up to that time had let Chick do the talking, "we're

willing to take a sporting chance just as you are. So just put your John Hancock on this piece of paper, and the money's yours."

Stubby took from his pocket a soiled and crumpled sheet of paper and, at the same time, a much-worn purse and counted out ten ten-dollar bills, which he placed on the rock just out of Forrester's reach.

Forrester's eyes shifted from Stubby to Chick for a moment, as if he were trying to ferret out what was at the bottom of this offer. Then he reached out his hand for the pen that Stubby was offering him.

"By gum," shrilled Forrester, "you two fellows are some dumb-bells! But that isn't none of my funeral. I'll do it! Gimme the pen!"

"No, you won't!" Roy Manley shouted loudly as the X Bar X boys sprang forward, covering Chick and Stubby with their rifles.

"So that's your game, is it, you rascals? Well, we'll qucer it for you. You can't fleece Forrester like that!"

At the appearance of the two boys the men started to reach for their pistols, but thought better of it as they looked into the muzzles of two long-barrelled rifles.

"Aw, have a heart!" groaned Stubby. "We ain't doing you any harm. It's just a business proposition tibat me and my pard thought we would have with Forrester. Don't come buttin' in."

Forrester, amazed at the scene, started to back away.

"Robbers!" he shouted. "They'll get that money. Grab it, quick!"

Roy kicked the money towards Stubby, who quickly pocketed it with his left hand, at the same time running his right along his belt in the direction of his pistol.

Bang!

Roy fired so that the bullet knocked off Stubby's hat with a swish.

"Laugh that off!" he said, as Stubby, pale-faced and trembling, raised his hands above his head. "We have the drop on you fellows now, and you're not going to get away with anything. Teddy, frisk them."

Teddy gleefully ran his hands over the men's clothes and took from each a revolver and a hunting-knife.

"What—wh-at's it all about?" gasped Jack Forrester. "We three was just a-talkin' business when you fellers had to butt in an' spoil it all."

"Aw, they're them Manley kids!" growled Stubby. "Think they're smart, but we haven't finished with 'em yet!"

"Manley? Not Bard Manley's boys?" Forrester's eyes brightened.

"That's who we are," explained Roy. "This is my brother Teddy, and I'm Roy Manley. Here's a letter from Dad for you which will introduce us," and he handed an envelope to the surprised prospector, who took out a letter and read it eagerly.

"Sure as I'm born, it is!" he exclaimed, as he finished reading. "Ought to have known you boys at first sight. You dark one look like your dad. Shake!" and Forrester reached out his hand and grasped first one of Roy's and then shook hands with Teddy.

"But what's all this rumpus about?" he added. "Who are these waddies, anyhow?"

"A Denver company wants that picce of land that is owned jointly by you, Dad, and Peter Ball, for a water irrigation scheme," explained Roy. "They want your signature as well as Mr. Ball's and Dad's to the contract, and we've been searching for you for nearly two weeks. When the deal goes through there'll be a lot of money for all three of you."

"Tell him how much, Roy," interrupted Teddy, his eyes dancing in expectation of what Forrester would say.

when he heard the amount. "Don't keep him in suspense."

Roy grinned, as he gave a glance at Chick and Stubby, who were sitting on a rock, listening disgustedly.

"There's a hundred thousand dollars in it for the three of you, Mr. Forrester," said Roy. "And you were just going to sell your share for a hundred dollars."

Forrester's eyes blinked rapidly and his face assumed a purple hue, which made the scar from the wildcat's claw show a vivid red.

"One hundred thousand dollars!" he repeated slowly. "Why, there ain't—there ain't that amount of money in all the world. You're a-foolin' me."

"No, we're not, Mr. Forrester," burst in Teddy. "That's the sum the water company's lawyer said he would pay after he got the signatures. One hundred thousand!"

The old man seemed stunned for a minute. Then he looked at Teddy searchingly from under his heavy grey eyebrows.

"What's that split three ways, young feller?" he asked.

"To be exact, thirty-three thousand, three hundred and thirty-three dollars and thirty-three cents," laughed Teddy. "Why, Mr. Forrester, it's a fortune for you, after all these years of grubbing for gold. It's better than finding a gold mine, for you won't have to work it. The gold's already mined for you."

"These guys here." Forrester motioned with his head towards the disconsolate pair. "How do they fit in?"

"These waddies got wind of this affair, I don't know how," explained Roy, "and they tried to beat us to you and get your signature, making over your share in the land to them. That's what they were trying to do, wasn't it, when we broke in?"

"Sure. Haw! haw! haw! Wanted it for building lots,

they said. Offered me a hundred dollars for my share. Began with ten, an' when I didn't bite at once they raised it to a hundred. Just begun to smell a rat when you boys come up. One hundred dollars! The robbers!" and Forrester got to his feet and would have landed a blow on Chick Harrison had not Roy interposed.

"Never mind, Jack," he said soothingly. "They didn't get away with it, and I'm glad we got here in time to stop them."

"Thirty-three thousand dollars, and all them cents!" exclaimed Forrester, trying to realise his good fortune. "Why, with that money I can go all over the world. To New York and on the Bowery and see all them fellers getting robbed and shot up. I've always wanted to go there."

Both Roy and Teddy laughed at the old man's enthusiasm, and even Chick and Stubby grinned a sickly smile.

"The Bowery isn't what it once was, they tell me, Jack," said Roy. "Reckon you'd be safer there than you are on Tumble Mountain. But you can go there if you want to, and maybe we'll go along."

"Will you?" The old prospector was delighted.

"We'll think about it," answered Teddy. "Now what shall we do with these rascals? Turn them over to the sheriff?"

"Shoot 'em," responded Forrester quickly. "Isn't any good to have such skunks around. Line 'em up against a tree and put a bullet through 'em."

"Aw, have a heart!" broke in Stubby, his face growing pale as he looked at the angry countenance of Forrester. "We were only tryin' to make some dough. We heard your dad and Pete Ball spill it when you boys started off. We was behind the old shack, and we thought we'd beat you to it. Don't be hard on us."

"That's one on Dad and Peter Ball," laughed Roy.

"I'll tell them about it when we get back to the X Bar, X. Mr. Ball's always telling other people not to broadcast everything they know. I'll have some fun with him."

Teddy drew Roy to one side, and for several minutes the boys talked together in low tones. Then Roy came back to where the two men were sitting.

"You're a couple of bad hombres," he said sternly. "First you stole our bronco, then you held us up and refused to give him back. Then you tried to swindle Jack Forrester out of a lot of money that's coming to him by rights. We ought to turn you over to the sheriff to keep you from making any more trouble."

"That's right!" interrupted Forrester, shaking his fist at the two men, who were crouched on a rock looking sullenly at Roy. "We'll tie 'em up and take 'em to the nearest settlement with us, and if they act up we'll shoot 'em."

"No, Jack," said Roy. "That would be too much trouble. Besides, we don't like their company. I think we'd better run them up the trail and let them go if they'll promise not to try any of their tricks again."

"We'll promise," said Stubby quickly. "Thought we might as well have a slice of that dough, as well as Bard Manley and Pete Ball. But we know when we're beat, don't we, Chick?"

"You've said it!" but Chick's little grey eyes gleamed angrily. "Give us our guns and we'll be off."

"I'm not so sure that I want you to have them," said Roy. "You might be tempted to get behind a rock and pot us off when we weren't looking."

"Aw, have a heart!" Stubby was anxious. "How can we get out of this wilderness without our guns?"

"We'll give you your knives," said Roy. "You've got plenty of grub, and I don't think anything will attack you. What say, Jack?"

"I'd rather shoot 'em, an' then we won't have to worry about 'em any more," said Forrester regretfully. "But I reckon it would be a lot of trouble to tote 'em in. So what you say goes. We'll take 'em up the trail a piece and then give 'em a kick."

"All settled," announced Roy. "Now, you waddies, you beat it as fast as you can, and if we catch you interfering with us again it won't be healthy for you. Come on! Vamoose!"

The men scrambled to their feet and mounted their broncos, but gave a longing glance at their pistols that Forrester had appropriated.

"Now beat it!" commanded Roy, and he and Teddy covered the men with their rifles.

"Ta, ta, waddies. Don't take any bad money," counselled Teddy, grinning. "And if you want a job on the new waterworks maybe those Denver fellows will give it to you."

Just before the men reached a turn in the trail, where it curved sharply behind a clump of hemlocks, Stubby looked back and shook his fist at Forrester.

"You haven't seen the last of us," he bellowed angrily. "We'll meet again, and when we do——"

Chapter XVII

JACK FORRESTER DISAPPEARS

"Those hombres are bad medicine," said Jack Forrester grimly, as the two men disappeared. "We ought to have shot 'em an' left 'em for the buzzards. Bet they'll get even with us yet!"

"No, they won't." Roy was positive. "We have them scared and they haven't any guns. We'll be on our way

back to the ranch before they get their wits together again."

"I'll go back to the X Bar X at once," said Forrester. "A hundred thousand dollars is a mint of money, and I'll do all I can to see that Bard Manley and Pete Ball get their share."

"All you'll have to do," laughed Roy, "is to sign some papers when we get home. Then the cheques will come through. Gosh, Dad will be glad when he sees you, I'll tell a maverick!"

"Tell who?" Forrester looked puzzled.

Roy grinned.

"Just an expression of mine," he said. "A maverick is an unbranded steer, and when the punchers want to say anything emphatically, they say, 'I'll tell a maverick'."

"Oh," said Forrester in a relieved tone. "Thought maybe that might be the name of that Denver feller who's puttin' through the deal."

"By the way, Mr. Forrester," said Roy, as the three were preparing to camp for the night, "how did you happen to put that sign on the cabin door? Weren't expecting us, were you?"

The old prospector grinned.

"Nope. But t'other day a couple of hunter fellows come to the cabin and stayed over night there. They went away the next mornin' but said they might come back. Didn't want 'em to think that I wasn't sociable, so I nailed that note on the door when I went up the trail."

"It also told Chick and Stubby where you had gone," observed Roy. "That's how they knew where to look for you. But all's well that ends well, and we got to you just in time."

The face of Jack Forrester grew troubled, and he gave a searching glance up the trail, where the two men had gone.

"Have a feelin'," he said slowly, "that those fellers are comin' back and will give us a mighty hot time. Ain't got through with 'em yet, to my notion."

"Hope they do come!" exclaimed Teddy. "There'll be a hot time all right if they do. We've got our rifles and their pistols, so I guess they can't do much with only their knives."

"Hope you're right," said Forrester, brightening. "But one of us must keep watch while the others sleep. I'll take the first watch. Slept good last night in that old cabin, so you boys turn in."

It was arranged that Forrester should keep watch for three hours, and then wake Roy, who would do a like number of hours guard duty. Then Teddy would watch the remainder of the night.

Ten minutes after this was decided, the boys were sleeping soundly, tired out by the excitement of the day's adventures.

Two hours went by. The camp fire had died, leaving but a few glowing embers that flared up occasionally as a breath of wind stirred them. The stars looked down from a cloudless sky and blinked brightly at the man who was keeping watch.

Forrester, elated that his good fortune had come when he was so nearly down and out, had no thought of sleep. It seemed to him that he would never sleep again, so busy were his thoughts with the past and the future. All his life he had been in search of a fortune and now, when he had almost given up hope, it had come.

Something dark on a limb above his head moved silently. For a moment a pair of great, glowing eyes that seemed like two balls of fire looked down on the little man below. Then the dark form lunged forward and hurtled down, landing squarely upon Jack Forrester.

The impact knocked Jack over, and for an instant he

was stunned. Then he shouted loudly and struck out with the barrel of his rifle, which he had in his hand.

There was an angry snarl and a hiss, and the sharp claws of the animal struck and tore at Forrester's heavy hunting jacket. Its face was so close to his that he could feel the animal's hot breath upon his cheek, and the great, green eyes blazed like two points of fire as the beast tore and scratched.

At the noise the X Bar X boys were instantly awake and reached for their rifles, but in the darkness they were afraid to fire, as they could see nothing but a struggling mass of man and catamount.

"Knife him, Jack!" shouted Roy. "We can't fire for fear we'd hit you."

"Can't reach it!" yelled Forrester. "He's got me pinned down. Take a chance and fire!"

But the boys were afraid to do so. Roy crawled swiftly on his hands and knees, his hunting knife between his teeth, nearer and nearer to the fighters.

When he reached them, he grasped the knife in one hand, while with the other he caught hold of one of the catamount's forelegs, the claws of which were tearing and ripping the sleeves of Jack Forrester's coat.

Swish!

Roy thrust his knife quickly upward and caught the animal under the shoulder-blade. With a snarl and a scream of rage and pain, the beast sprang away up the bank, but still full of fight.

Teddy fired. The bullet bit into the ground and threw up a spurt of dirt. He had missed, but just then Roy found his rifle, which he had dropped in his advance on the catamount.

Crack! Crack!

One bullet went through the animal's neck and it screamed loudly. For a moment it lay still, and Teddy gave a shout of delight.

"You got him, Roy! You finished him!"

Just then the catamount leaped high into the air and, with a snarl, tried to clutch an overhanging limb of a tree just out of its reach, then hurtled to the ground.

There was a convulsive shudder of the animal's limbs. A little sigh as it relaxed, and then it lay still, this time not to move again.

"Are you hurt, Jack?" Teddy was anxious as he heard the old prospector scrambling to his feet.

"No, consarn it! Just got my coat torn. I'm a fine watchdog, I am. Never saw the critter until he fell plump on me. Served me right if I'd been chewed up."

"We'll start a fire and take a look at the cat," said Roy, striking a match and setting fire to a pile of twigs. "It's a fine one, all right," he added, as in the light of the fire the three saw an almost perfect specimen of a cougar that Roy's bullet had killed.

"Guess it's my watch now. You go to sleep, Jack," said Roy, after he had examined the old man and found that he had sustained nothing more than a few scratches.

"We young fellows ought to stand watch, anyway. I'll split the rest of the night with 'Tiddy."

"Reckon you're about right." Forrester grinned ruefully. "I was star-gazin', thinkin' about the hard times I'd had and how now things would be comin' a little easier, when, plump, along came that critter and bowled me over."

"Well, go to sleep now and dream about the good times that are coming," said Teddy. "To-morrow mornin' we'll start for home. Good old X Bar X, I'll be glad to see it again."

The next morning, after a good breakfast for themselves and their animals, the X Bar X boys and Jack Forrester saddled their broncos and with light hearts

started to return to the Manley ranch. When Roy showed him the map that they had been using, the old prospector grinned.

"Don't wonder you got lost if you followed that thing," he said. "Those maps aren't good a year after they're made. Fresh trails are being blazed all the time, and many of the old ones are blocked by landslides and storms. But I know this place like a book. There's a short cut through the Rockies that will save us many miles. Kinder thought I'd go back to the old minin' camp an' take a last look around. Might have missed an out-cropping of gold. But I reckon we'd better get back to your dad's ranch as soon as we can. Bard will be worried about you."

"He'll be pleased to see you," said Roy. "He's told us a great deal about you, and how you and Mr. Ball and he prospected together. I remember your coming to the ranch once when I was a kid," he added.

"Of course, that was a long time ago," observed Teddy mischievously. "He's a big man now, Jack."

"He ain't married, is he?" asked Forrester anxiously.

"No. His girl turned him down, and——"

"She didn't either!" interrupted Roy, his face ablaze. "And I didn't ask her. Never mind him, Mr. Forrester. He has a girl, too, that he's crazy over. But she left him and went to New York."

"Mebbe we can hunt her up when we go there," said Forrester eagerly. "Anyway, if we don't find her most likely we can find another just as good."

"You can't!" exclaimed Teddy, as he leaped on the back of Flash. "There's only one Curly Carew. But don't stand gabbing, you waddies. It's a long way home and I'm in a hurry to get there."

For the next two days Forrester led the boys through a mass of twisting and winding trails, none of which were shown on the map that Roy carried, and which ran

in such a criss-cross fashion that the two boys were utterly bewildered.

"I don't know whether I'm coming or going!" observed Roy, on the morning of the third day. "But I suppose you do, Jack. Gosh, it would be awful if we got lost and didn't get back in time for you to sign those papers. It would be all off then."

"We'll get there all right," answered Forrester, with conviction, and yet Roy thought he saw a worried look in the old man's eyes that had not been there when they started.

"Think he knows where he's going?" whispered Roy to Teddy. "Or has he gone looney at the thought of getting that money? Seems to me that we just go around and around."

Teddy, too, had his doubts.

"All we can do is to go on and trust to luck," he answered. "But I guess Jack's all right. He ought to know the Rockies like a book. He's been over them enough. Don't worry, Roy," he added confidently.

As noon of the third day approached, Forrester drew rein beside a small brook and waited for the boys to come up.

"You fellers get dinner ready," he said. "I'm goin' up the hill a piece an' have a look around. Ought to be able to see Bitter Rock Creek from there. Then we'll shoot down to it and be at the X Bar X in three or four days."

The boys soon had the dinner cooked. They waited some time for Forrester, but he did not appear.

"Let's eat," said Teddy impatiently. "I'm as hungry as a bear. Probably Jack found it farther than he thought. Let's not wait."

The boys ate their dinner, saving a portion for Forrester. Then, as he did not return, they became alarmed and started out to search for him. For a couple

of hours they traversed the crooked trails, shouting at intervals and calling him by name, but they could find no trace of the old prospector.

• Jack Forrester was missing.

Chapter XVIII

LOST

When the X Bar X boys finally realised that there was little likelihood of their finding Jack Forrester, they looked at each other with startled eyes.

"I'm afraid that something serious has happened to Jack," said Roy dubiously. "He isn't the kind to desert us like this. He may have fallen over a cliff or have had some accident and is badly injured—or perhaps dead."

Teddy, whose forehead had puckered into deep wrinkles, so great was his effort to solve the problem, suddenly jumped from the rock on which he was sitting and gave a shout.

"I have it!" he exclaimed. "They've got Jack!"

"Who? What do you mean?"

"Why, don't you see? Chick and Stubby have kidnapped him. It's as plain as day."

"What would they want to do that for?" asked Roy, perplexed.

Teddy looked at his brother in disgust.

"Why, you dumb-bell, to keep him from signing that paper before the time's up, of course. Maybe they won't hurt him; but they'll hold him until the water company has bought another tract, then let him go. That is, of course, if he won't turn his share over to them."

Roy's eyes blazed.

"Guess you've hit it, Ted!" he exclaimed. "They said they'd get even, but I didn't think they'd do anything like that."

"They'd do anything!" asserted Teddy, with heat. "They're bad medicine. Now we've got to hunt for them, Roy. Let's start."

"They probably were watching and grabbed him soon after he left us," said Roy. "Likely they're miles away by this time. We've searched for a mile in every direction and haven't found a trace. Don't know which way to look now, do you, Ted?"

Teddy shook his head.

"No, I don't. And what's more, Jack's turned us so around following these crazy trails that we don't know which way we're heading. Wow! If we ever see home again we'll be lucky."

"There's only one thing to do," mused Roy, as he watched a beetle scurry under a fallen log, "and that's what Jack spoke of. Get down to Bitter Rock Creek again and then strike out for home."

"But we're not going without Jack Forrester!" asserted Teddy warmly. "We've got to get him or everything will be lost."

"Not necessarily." Roy had been thinking quickly. "One of us could hurry back to the ranch and explain that we found Forrester and that he had later been kidnapped. No doubt, under the circumstances, the water company would extend the time for signing the contract."

"We've got ten days left," pleaded Teddy, his eyes eager. "I hate to go back and let Dad know those low-down waddies got the best of us. Let's cruise around for a couple of days, anyway, and see if we can't find them and Jack."

"Good idea! And when we find them we won't fool with them any more. We'll tie 'em up to a tree, as Jack

suggested, or else take them with us and turn them over to the sheriff."

"Ought to have done that in the first place," mourned Teddy. "But we didn't. Well, where do we go from here?"

The trail that the boys finally decided to follow was one of the widest that they had seen during the past few days and appeared to lead directly upward. After travelling on it for a short distance, however, the path turned abruptly and started gradually to drop again.

Teddy stopped suddenly and looked at Roy with something akin to fear in his eyes.

"Roy," he said, "which way are we going?"

Roy consulted his compass and shook his head dubiously.

"I should have said that we'd been going south, but according to the compass we're going due north. It doesn't seem possible, yet I suppose the compass must be relied on. I'm all turned around and don't know where we are," and for the first time in his life Teddy saw his brother at a loss to know what to do.

Teddy's eyes swept the trail for an instant, which disappeared into a clump of oaks and seemed to end there. Then he looked at his brother fixedly.

"Roy," he said, "we're lost. We might as well admit it. We're lost in the Rockies!"

"Reckon we are, Ted." Roy tried to appear unconcerned and failed dismally. "Looks to me as if we were up against it. At this rate we could wander around for weeks and not get any nearer home, and we've only grub enough to last us ten days more. We might as well look the situation in the face, Ted."

For several minutes neither boy spoke, each busy with his own thoughts trying to solve the problem that confronted them. There was no sound but the gentle sighing of the pines as the freshening wind waved their

branches to and fro. Even the broncos seemed to feel the seriousness of the situation, and stood with lowered heads, while the duffel horse whinnied faintly and poked its nose into Teddy's pocket.

Lost!

Miles and miles of twisting, turning, treacherous trails between them and home. Trails that were so crooked that they often circled around and met themselves near the starting place; trails that were infested with animals eager for their prey and containing human beings who even then perhaps might be watching from a vantage point, ready to harm the boys should they interfere further with their plans.

"Well," said Roy at last, "there's no use of our mooning around here. We've got to keep going, if we don't know where."

"Forward march!" Teddy urged Flash forward, with the duffel horse trailing along behind.

In less than half an hour the boys found out where that particular trail led to. Just after a sharp turn they came up against a blank wall of rock that rose a sheer hundred feet.

"Thanks for the information." Teddy bowed ironically before the rock. "Didn't want to go any farther this way, anyhow. Come on, Roy, let's try that path to the left."

All that afternoon the boys urged the now weary broncos up and down the steep trails, through narrow defiles, over rocky paths that were strewn with boulders and sharp stones, without finding any trace of Jack Forrester or getting, seemingly, any nearer to Bitter Rock Creek.

Late in the day Teddy, who was riding ahead, suddenly gave a shout of joy.

"Roy! We're on their trail! Look! They've camped here. There's been a fire not very long ago. Hurrah!"

Roy jumped from his pony and scrutinized carefully a place on a rock that showed unmistakable signs of a fire having been built there. For a full minute he stood looking, then he turned to Teddy.

"Do you know what that means, Ted?" he asked, his voice shaking a little.

"That we're on the right trail, doesn't it, Roy?" Teddy was surprised at his brother's sober face.

"No, Ted. Those are the remains of our own camp fire that we built this noon. It means that all this time we've been going around in a circle."

As he realised the truth of Roy's words, Teddy's face paled and his under lip quivered a little.

Lost! Yes, lost in the Rockies! There was no doubt of it now. Well, what if they were? Teddy threw back his shoulders and a look of determination came into his blue eyes.

"Some little circlers, aren't we?" he said cheerfully. "Well, this isn't the first time that's been done. Lots of folks go around and around when they're lost, especially in the woods. We've just got to start out again, Roy, and I'll bet we don't do it a second time!"

"Good old Ted!" Roy said affectionately, putting his arm around his brother's shoulders. "Ought to have known you wouldn't give in. But it kind of got me for a minute, getting back to the same old place. We'll find Forrester yet, Ted, and take him home. Nothing can stop us."

"Now you're talking!" Teddy was delighted that Roy had recovered his usual poise. "Let's go by the compass, Roy. As near as I can reckon, Bitter Rock Creek is due west. If we can once strike it we will know where we are. On the way we'll keep a lookout for Forrester and those waddies, and we'll find 'em, too, or I'm a dodo bird!"

"Come on!" Roy was already in the saddle and turned

Star's head towards a trail that, for the moment at least, ran due west.

Just before nightfall the boys made camp beside a small rivulet that furnished them and the broncos with drinking water, and after some search a windfall of broken and uprooted trees was discovered, under which they decided to pass the night.

As it was warm and there were no signs of animals in the neighbourhood, they concluded not to build a fire. Just as the moon was rising the boys stretched themselves under the protection of the branches.

"To-morrow will be another day," said Teddy sleepily. "And, gosh, Roy, we've got to find them without any more fooling around. Somehow, I've got a feeling that we'll be lucky."

"Hope so." Roy was discouraged at the outlook, but he would not let Teddy know. "We'll attempt it, anyhow." In a very few minutes the boys were asleep.

Tired out from their long and useless search for Jack Forrester, Teddy and Roy slept soundly, and it was not until the morning light was beginning to filter in through the trees that they awoke.

Snap! Crack! Rustle! Thud!

With a start Roy sat up and looked around. From under the pile of branches he could see nothing of what was going on outside. Teddy, too, was awake.

"There's somebody coming," he whispered excitedly. "Bet it's those waddies! Got your gun handy, Roy?"

"Yes. Right in my hand. Come on. They shan't get the drop on us this time if I can help it."

The boys crawled slowly towards the entrance to the windfall, careful not to make any sound that would give the marauders any idea that they were awake.

Then there came the sharp, shrill neigh of a bronco and a thrashing in the underbrush. The boys could hear the ponies pulling and straining at their halters.

Just to the left they could see a great, black form that in the dim light seemed of huge proportions.

"It's a bear!" whispered Teddy excitedly. "A big one, too! He's after the broncs!"

Chapter XIX

BATTLING WITH BRUIN

Snap! Snap! Snap!

The boys could hear the breaking of the ropes with which the broncos had been tethered as the frantic animals tried to escape the bear. The ropes were old, although sufficiently strong to keep the ponies from straying under ordinary circumstances, but the sudden strain upon them had parted the strands and given the broncos their liberty.

As the horses galloped away, the bear turned slowly, lumbered off and quickly disappeared behind an outcropping of rock.

"Quick! Now's our chance!" and Teddy sprang from under cover of the windfall with Roy at his heels.

The bear, however, had made better time than the boys anticipated, and when they rounded the ledge it was not in sight.

"Come on! They went this way! See the broken bushes!" and Roy pointed to where some of the undergrowth had been trampled down, evidently by the fleeing broncos and the pursuing bear.

"It's a black bear!" exclaimed Teddy, as the boys plunged through the thicket. "A whopper, too!"

"It looked black because of the dim light," said Roy wisely. "But I'll bet it's a grizzly. There's plenty of them in this section at this season of the year, and they almost always come out in the early morning to hunt."

"Wow! Look out, Roy!"

The boys had reached a sudden turn in the trail, and there, confronting them, its eyes filled with anger at being deprived of its breakfast, was the grizzly.

Without a show of fear, the bear lunged straight at the two boys, its big mouth wide open and showing its long, cruel teeth.

Crack! Bang!

Teddy and Roy fired so close together that the sound of the explosions merged into one, but although the bear was within a few feet, in the excitement of the moment, both shots went wild.

Uttering roar after roar of defiance, the big grizzly charged fiercely.

Bang! Bang!

One of the bullets went high and bit into an oak tree, sending down a shower of bark and leaves. The other struck the bear in the jaw, and as the beast lunged forward it left a trail of crimson on the white rock.

There was no time to reload, and the boys turned to run. But Teddy slipped on a smooth stone, and fell to the ground. The bear was going so fast that it could not stop, and would have been upon the boy had not Teddy given a quick twist and rolled out of its way.

"Good work, Ted! We'll show him he can't monkey with us before we get through," shouted Roy. "Gosh! He's coming back!" as the bear turned and was almost upon them again.

The animal was fighting mad. Its great jaws dripped with blood from the ugly wound inflicted by a bullet from Roy's rifle, and it roared loud and long in its fury.

The boys turned and ran down the side of the hill which grew steeper as they went on. Stumbling and falling, they bruised themselves against the jagged rocks that lined the way and finally fell sprawling at the bottom of the ravine.

"Now come on, you brute! We're ready for you!" shouted Teddy, as he picked himself up. The boys could hear the bear plunging and crashing on the hillside and, as he came into view, both fired again.

One bullet raked the bear's side and cut a furrow in its shaggy coat, which was followed by another outburst of rage from the angry animal. It began to slip, and then to fall. So swift was its descent that before the boys could jump out of its way, the bear had struck them and bowled them to the ground.

In the mêlée, a great paw reached out and ripped the sleeve of Roy's coat, making a scratch on the boy's arm from shoulder to elbow. Roy, however, jerked himself away and managed to evade a second blow from the great paws.

Grunting and roaring, the bear got quickly to its feet, and with a couple of bounds dashed into the mouth of a cave which, until that moment, the boys had not noticed.

"Hurt, Roy?" Teddy sprang to his brother's side and began to take off the boy's coat.

"It's nothing," said Roy grimly. "Just a scratch, that's all. We can fix it up after we get that rascal."

"We've got him bottled!" Teddy announced in delight, having satisfied himself that Roy's injuries were not serious. "He'll never get out of there alive!"

Crack! Bang!

Teddy raised his rifle and fired into the cave. The boys could hear the bullets as they spat against the rock, but there was no answering sound from the bear.

"No good, Ted," said Roy, as his brother reloaded. "Only a waste of ammunition. We've either got to wait until he comes out or go in after him."

"Come on!" Teddy's fighting blood was up. "We'll never be safe until that fellow is disposed of. If he should come out we'll separate, one on each side of the cave, and we'll sure get him."

As the boys approached the cave, there came from its dark depths a low, rumbling growl that told them that bruin was not in a humour to be trifled with.

"We've got to be careful, Ted," said Roy. "We're in the light and he can see us, while we can't see him. We can turn our flashlights on him, though, and ought to be able to get a bead on him all right."

Into the cave went the X Bar X boys, holding their flashlights high and moving them in a circle. For a moment there was no sound, then roar after roar came in quick succession, and they could see the bear moving about as if preparing for another charge.

"Quick, Ted. We've got him! Fire!" called Roy, loudly.

Crack! Bang! Boom!

The sound of the exploding shells in the narrow confines of the cave was deafening, the stifling smoke caused the boys to gasp and choke.

"Hurry! Get out of this!" sputtered Roy, as he grasped Teddy by the arm and made a dash for the entrance. "Wait until the smoke clears, then we'll see what damage we did. Wow! I can't hear a thing!" and Roy began to rub his ears.

"What say?" Teddy was almost as deaf as his brother, but after a few minutes in the open air, both began to hear better and decided to go into the cave again. Just at that moment, however, the bear appeared at the entrance.

With a low, rumbling roar the animal rose on its hind feet and took a step forward. Then it wavered, its head lolled from side to side, a convulsive shudder shook its great body, and it toppled to the ground with a crash.

Roy raised his rifle to fire, then lowered it again.

"He's done for," he said quietly. "No use wasting good shots. We may need them before we can get any more."

"Bear steak for dinner!" shouted Teddy gleefully. "How many pounds will you have?" and the boy drew his hunting knife from its sheath and flourished it in the air.

"None for me, thanks," grinned Roy. "Ate bear once and was sick for a week. Never again!"

"I can't eat all of him," responded Teddy. "So I guess I won't take any. We'll leave Mr. Bear right here and if Chick and Stubby come along they can have a good meal. That reminds me, Roy. We haven't had any breakfast yet, and I'm famished. Hot dog!" and Teddy looked at his brother with startled eyes.

"What is it? What's the matter now?"

"The broncs and the duffel horse! We haven't seen hide nor hair of them since they ran when the bear tried to get 'em. They must be up on the top of the trail yet. Reckon we'll have to climb for it, Roy," and Teddy looked anxiously at the rocky hillside down which they had plunged.

It was difficult work climbing that hill. The boys had to go hand over hand in some places, catching hold of a rock here and a stump or overhanging branch there. Long before they had reached the top their hands were cut and sore, their clothing torn, and Roy's wounded arm was beginning to pain him.

At last, however, the boys climbed over the ledge and reached the windfall in which they had been so rudely awakened.

"Come down to the brook, Roy, and I'll bathe your arm," said Teddy. "Then we'll hunt the broncs." But when he had finished binding up the injured arm with strips of handkerchiefs and the boys were ready to start on the search, they could find no sign of the missing animals.

"They broke their halters, all right," said Teddy, as he found the trees to which the broncos had been tied,

together with the parted strands of rope. "Gosh! They must have been scared to have pulled so hard. I'll bet the poor things are half frightened to death, right this minute."

"It would be a joke if we couldn't find them," observed Roy. "How'd you like to hoof it over the Rockies, Ted, with nothing to eat? Spoil your handsome figure, I'll tell a maverick!"

But Teddy was not in a mood to joke. The experience of the past two weeks had upset his nerves, and, at the moment, he was inclined to take life seriously.

"They went through here," he said, as he examined the broken underbrush, "and in that open space you can see prints of their hoofs. Then there isn't another trace." Teddy looked puzzled. "You don't suppose that bear got them after all, do you?"

"Couldn't possibly. We heard the brons scream and we got right after the bear. Hello! What's that? There's something moving way over to the left. It's a bronc or another bear," and Roy half raised his rifle.

"It's the duffel horse!" exclaimed Teddy excitedly. "Whoopee! Ned!"

At the sound of his master's voice the bronco, although some distance away, whinnied and began to trot towards the boys. In another minute it stuck its nose into Teddy's pocket, looking for a lump of sugar.

"Now for the other brons," said Teddy, as he led the pony back from the brook after giving it a drink. "They can't be far off."

"We'll tie Ned here to this tree," said Roy. "Can't be bothered taking him along. He'll be all right, I guess. Don't believe any more bears are around."

The boys started off, but after spending two hours in combing the trails they were forced to admit that the missing bronses were not to be found.

"Hot dog!" Teddy took out his handkerchief and

wiped the perspiration from his forehead. "Worse, and more of it! We lose Jack Forrester, just escape being eaten by a bear, now our mounts are gone. What's the answer, Roy?" asked Teddy.

"There doesn't seem to be any answer," replied Roy soberly. "The question is: Where are Flash and Star?"

Chapter XX

MANY PERILS

The X Bar X boys were face to face with the fact that they must go forward on foot, if at all; and without mounts it seemed impossible that they should be able to find their way out of the mountains or, in any event, be able to reach home before the expiration of the time limit set by the Denver attorney.

"We'll hoof it, 'Ted,'" Roy said at last. "We can't sit down and do nothing. We'll go until we get tired then rest a while. I don't think we'll starve, for there's plenty of game about, but I guess it's all off with Forrester. That water power company won't wait if we don't show up."

"Always did like the infantry better than the cavalry," grinned Teddy; "so let's start," and the boy untied the duffel horse and fastened a rope to its bridle.

Each boy tried to put up a bold front, not letting the other see that he was discouraged, but after tramping over the rough trails for several hours they were both ready to call a halt and were glad when they found a mountain stream in which they plunged for a swim.

"Feel better already," exclaimed Teddy, as he emerged from the water. "Nothing like the cold water

treatment when you've got the blues. Now for something to eat!"

The boys soon had their supper ready. This consisted of bacon, canned beans, bread, and coffee. When it was finished they found a suitable camping place for the night, tied the one remaining bronco under a ledge, and built a blazing fire which they decided they would keep up all night.

"Don't want to have any more bear visitors," laughed Teddy, "or we might lose Ned with the provisions. Then we'd be in a nice mess."

Roy went out into an open space and looked anxiously at the sky. A bank of dark clouds was slowly rising from the horizon, while overhead patches of white ones were scudding swiftly from the west, whipped by the rising wind.

"Don't like the looks of it," he said as he came back to the ledge, under which the boys were to sleep. "There's going to be another storm, and you know what that means in the Rockies, Ted. We seem to be out of luck this trip."

All that night the boys slept fitfully. The wind whistled and shrieked through the trees and drove clouds of pine needles up under the ledge, half covering the boys. There were intermittent rumbles of thunder, but when the boys awoke at dawn the storm had not yet broken.

"We didn't have a call from Mister B'ar," announced Teddy, as he shook the pine needles from his clothes. "And the storm didn't come, either. For all of which we are truly thankful," he added. "Think it is going to rain, Roy?"

"Sooner or later, and probably sooner," replied Roy, with one eye on the sky and the other on a piece of bacon he was toasting. "Gosh! what's that in the coffee. Ted?"

"Oh, nothing but a grasshopper," replied Teddy calmly. "Saw it jump in but didn't like to mention the little matter. Never mind, Roy, if he is drowned there are plenty of others left. Hey! Don't waste that coffee!"

Roy dumped the pot and made a grimace at the struggling insect.

"Like my grasshoppers broiled and not boiled," he said. "But I guess we won't wait to make any more coffee. Shall we start or wait until the storm's over?"

"We can't let a little thing like a storm hold us up," asserted Teddy. "We've been wet before, so come on, Roy, let's hustle. I have a hunch that this is the day that we find Jack Forrester."

"Never did believe in hunches," said Roy gloomily. "Rather we'd find the broncos just now than Forrester. Gee, but my feet are sore!"

When the boys started the sky was a leaden grey. The wind had luffed to the south and then almost died away and a thick, greenish haze hung over the mountainside.

"She's coming, all right," said Teddy, "and there isn't a place to hide. Well, we'll take our chances with the rest of the trees. Hot dog!" he added excitedly.

There was a sound as if the sky was being torn apart. A vivid flame of light, and a great yellow chain shot downward, a white glare that seemed to envelop the boys on every side, then a loud booming crash that roared and re-echoed through the hills like a bombardment of great guns.

The clouds settled down so near to the mountainside that the boys could feel the white vapour, which almost choked them. The duffel horse, terrified at the lightning and thunder, wrenched away the rope by which Teddy was leading him, and with a wild scream of fright, plunged down the hillside and was gone.

Then came the rain in great, slanting sheets. It beat and pelted, it whipped the boys until they gasped for

breath and threw up their arms to protect their faces. "There was no place to go for shelter, but they could not stand still in that howling storm."

Plunging and reeling, they staggered forward in the teeth of the gale. Slipping and falling, they grasped the wind-bent trees in their struggle against the storm's fury.

The rain stopped as suddenly as it had come. The skies lightened and assumed a greenish-grey hue. A dark, spiral cloud appeared that was whirling straight in the direction of the two boys.

"Wind! It's a cyclone!" shouted Roy, who had seen such a cloud before on the plains. "It's going to get us, Ted! We can't escape!"

From the direction of the cloud came a dull roar. Then a splintering, cracking noise that told of breaking and uprooted trees—that awful sound when wind is on the rampage and knows no master but its own force.

A swirl of dust and leaves struck the boys and made them gasp.

"It will be all over in a minute!" shouted Teddy, his lips close to Roy's ear. "Good old X Bar X, we'll never——"

He did not finish, for Roy gripped him fiercely by the arm and pointed to the wind-cloud. With its strange whirling motion, it had suddenly swerved to the south, missing the boys by a scant half-mile and leaving in its wake a mass of wreckage and debris.

All around them fell a shower of broken limbs and branches, caught up by the edge of the wind cloud and hurled far and wide in the aftermath of the tornado.

"Saved!" Roy's lips were white. "If that cloud hadn't switched, in another minute we'd have been done for!"

"Thought I'd never see Mom and Dad again, and—and Curly Carew. Well, guess that will be all for to-day." Teddy was as much shaken as his brother at

their nearness to death, and he was not ashamed to let Roy know it.

But it was not. Again came the lightning, cleaving the sky with its fiery forks, followed by crash after crash of thunder that vibrated so greatly that the whole hill-side seemed to shake and tremble.

Then hail, in great, pelting balls of ice, that ripped through the trees and stripped the leaves from them and formed little conical balls of white.

"Listen, Roy! What's that?"

From far up the mountain there came a low booming that sounded as if great pieces of rock were being blasted and hurled over the cliffs into the chasms below.

There was silent for a moment. Then it came again.

Boom! Bo-o-o-m! Rumble!

"Bet it's a volcano broken loose!" exclaimed Teddy, his eyes growing big as the sound increased in volume. "Never heard of any in the Rockies, but——"

A big stone suddenly fell near them, breaking a young sapling in two. Another stone fell, then another, and a shower of small rocks with great clods of sod.

Bo-oo-o-m!

It was a sullen roar, like the thunder of water that has burst its bounds.

Looking up, the boys could see great boulders tumbling towards them. The noise increased in volume until it seemed as if the whole mountain were bellowing and groaning under torture.

"A landslide! Run for your life!" shouted Roy, and both boys started down the steep incline.

The pursuing landslide seemed to give the boys wings. On and on they went, stumbling, sliding, slipping. Their clothing was torn by the sharp projecting rocks and branches that had been broken by the storm. Stones fell all around them and all hope seemed to have gone when the trail turned abruptly and almost at their

feet was a broad, rushing river, the existence of which they had not known before.

"Jump in and swim, Ted!" called Roy. "That's our only chance! Maybe we can beat the slide that way!"

Into the dark, fast-rushing water the boys plunged and struck out for the farther shore. They were not a moment too soon. On their heels came a rush of earth and rocks that crashed into the water with an ominous splash.

The river boiled and foamed and great waves thrown out by the impact made swift eddies which carried the boys out of their course, down the stream, over submerged logs and hidden rocks that seemed to yearn to impale them.

Teddy was swimming some distance behind Roy with a short, choppy stroke that propelled him through the water rapidly, and he managed to steer a course between the branches and debris that were swirling all around him.

Roy, too, was swimming strongly, a long, crawling stroke. In another minute or two the boys would have been out of harm's way. Then, with a great grinding and cracking of limbs, a big tree on the bank toppled over and started to fall towards the river. Intent on avoiding the floating wreckage, Roy did not see it coming until he heard Teddy's shout.

"Dive, Roy! Dive for your life!"

With just a glance at the descending tree, Roy Manley dived straight under the waters of the rushing flood.

Chapter XXI

LUCK AT LAST

Smash! Crash!

With a great splash the big tree fell into the river just at the place where Roy Manley had dived. The water churned and boiled. The branches whipped the surface and spread out, threatening to entangle Teddy, who had all he could do to avoid being struck by them.

The tree settled downward with an ominous sucking sound. Teddy's heart almost stood still. Roy, his brother, was somewhere underneath in the dark water, struck and crushed perhaps by the great leviathan of the forest, pinned down, it might be, in the swirling river and unable to rise.

It was a moment that Teddy Manley never forgot.

"Roy, Roy!" he called. "Where are you? Are you down there?"

Then he laughed wildly. Of course Roy was down there and could not hear him. Where else could he be? He must go after him and bring him up if possible.

Extricating himself from some of the trailing branches that the eddies had swept around him, Teddy dived fearlessly. He had often swum under water, but it was different here—dark and murky and muddy from the shower of debris that had fallen into the river and the crashing of the big tree.

Feeling his way along, he found that the tree was resting in a slanting position, and, diving lower, he swam under it. There was no Roy. Where could he be?

With his lungs almost bursting from lack of air,

Teddy rose to the surface, gasping and sputtering. For a minute he clung to a branch of the tree for a brief rest, then he dived again.

This time, getting a little accustomed to the darkness, Teddy swam around and around the fallen tree, going under it once more, and searching in every direction for the missing Roy. Again there was no trace of him.

Coming once more to the surface, the boy brushed the water from his eyes and his dripping hair, and, looked around.

As far as he could see, the river was strewn with the wreckage of the storm and the landslide. Branches and trees that had been uprooted by the wind floated swiftly past him. The water seemed completely overspread with a mass of leaves and twigs that formed a covering of green.

Then, a hundred yards away, Teddy thought he saw a bobbing head. The boy's heart thumped loudly. Was it Roy? Could it be?

"Roy! Roy!" he shouted, but his voice was drowned in the rush of the river and the crashing of the debris as it swirled against the rocks.

Now the head was hidden by a mass of branches that were being carried along with the current. Now it appeared again.

It was Roy! There could be no doubt of it! Roy alive, and swimming strongly towards the shore.

Letting go of the limb which he had grasped to keep from being drawn into the current, Teddy began to swim. It was easy going that way, as the water was running rapidly.

Watching the bobbing head, Teddy saw that it was nearing the shore. Quickening his stroke, the boy soon reached his brother, who had scrambled up the bank and was lying with his eyes closed stretched out in the sun.

"Roy, are you hurt? Speak to me, Roy, old man!" pleaded Teddy.

For a few moments there was no motion to show that Roy was alive, then his eyelids quivered and opened and he smiled faintly as he saw his brother bending over him.

"I'm all right," he said in a weak voice, raising himself on an elbow. "Gosh, Ted, that was a narrow escape. I swam under water and just beat that tree by a few inches. Thought I was gone when it struck, but I managed to get away."

After the boys had stripped off their wet clothes and dried them in the sun, then donned them again, they began to take stock of their resources.

Their rifles had been strapped to their backs and were uninjured, while their cartridges and matches, which they carried in a rubber, water-tight belt, were found to be dry.

"Well," announced Roy, trying to be cheerful, "we've lost Jack Forrester, Flash, Star, and the duffel bronc with the provisions, we're miles and miles from the X Bar X and don't know how to get there, we've been in a cyclone and a landslide, and were nearly drowned in the river. Aside from those little things we've nothing to complain about."

Crack! Bang!

"I've killed a deer! Come and help me drag him out!"

Teddy had seen the animal moving in the brushwood and had fired.

The two boys dragged the animal to the river's edge and were delighted at the prospect of fresh meat.

"We won't starve as long as we have venison!" exclaimed Teddy gleefully. "Turn to and help me carve off a steak, Roy."

That dinner of venison the boys always declared

saved their lives. They roasted it over a small fire, and were soon cutting long strips of the meat with their hunting knives and eating it voraciously.

"But Nell and Curly would have to pay five dollars for a dinner like this in New York," observed Roy, grinning. "Nothing like living close to nature, Ted, to get all the delicacies of the season. Why, what's the matter?"

At the mention of Ethel Carew, Teddy's eyes had grown sober.

"Curly seems a million miles away! Wonder if we'll see either of them again, Roy!"

"Sure! They'll be back before the summer's over. They said they would, and they're not the kind of girls to go back on their promises. Reckon Belle Ada is having too good a time in New York and don't want to break away."

"They're great pals, and I hope they come back soon," said Teddy fervently. "Hope we'll be there to see them," he added.

"We won't if we sit around here much longer," asserted Roy. "Let's carve up the deer, Ted, and take some steaks along. Might get tired of eating grass in a week or two, unless we find the duffel horse. Guess that poor old brute is gone for good now."

"Roy," said Teddy suddenly, "do you know what I think? From that landslide, this must be Tumble Mountain we're on yet, and this river is the source of Bitter Rock Creek. Gosh! if it is, all we have to do is to follow it down to the place that we first found it and then strike out for home."

"And forget about Forrester and our broncs and what we started out to do?"

"Forgot about them for a minute," answered Teddy, flushing. "Guess we'll have to keep on, Roy, and try to find Forrester or die in the attempt. It won't do any harm, though, to follow the river down for a while and

see where it leads to. Just as likely to find Jack that way as any other."

"We'll do it!" Roy sprang to his feet and began to fashion a rude basket of twigs in which to carry the venison. "The sooner we start the sooner we'll get where we're going. And it can't be any too soon to suit me," he added.

On their way again, the boys chose a trail that for some distance kept within sight of the river. The going was difficult, however. In many places the path was blocked by the wreckage of the recent storm, and the boys had to climb over fallen trees and make their way through tangled masses of brushwood that impeded their progress.

"Well," said Roy, as they stopped to rest for a few minutes, "reckon we've gone a mile in the last two hours. If we knew how many miles it is to the X Bar X we could figure how long it will take us to get home."

Home! A picture came before Teddy's eyes of the house on the ranch, his mother and Belle Ada, the cowboys and—— Then it suddenly faded and Teddy's nose sniffed the air.

"What do you smell? Perfume from the Orient or just plain Rocky Mountain laurel?" asked Roy mischievously.

"Smoke! Can't you smell it, Roy?"

"Sure thing! It's smoke, all right. Wonder if those waddies have set the woods on fire. Wouldn't put it past them!"

"They couldn't after all the rain we've had. Someone's built a camp fire, and it isn't the broncs, that's sure. Wonder who it is!"

"Chick and Stubby. It's about time they turned up again. Well, if they do we'll show them no mercy." Roy's face was hard. "It's through them that we got

into this mess, and if we meet them again I'm going to get even," and Roy scowled.

"It's coming from the north," asserted Teddy. "No, from the south," as the wind veered for an instant. "Gosh, Roy. Over towards the east it looks smoky. Maybe they have set the woods on fire after all."

"We'll find out what that smoke comes from if it takes all night," vowed Roy. "It's getting dark already, and in a short time we ought to be able to see the glow. I vote we go north for a way. It smells stronger when the wind is from that quarter."

Night comes quickly in the Rockies, as the sun dips behind the great mountain ranges and is gone almost immediately. There is hardly any twilight, and, as the boys hurried eagerly on in their search for the elusive smoke, the darkness came with a rush.

"I can see it," whispered Teddy excitedly. "Just to the left, Roy. Only a faint glow, but it's a camp fire, or I'm a ring-tailed dodo bird!"

"Can't see anything. You're dreaming, Ted," said Roy after looking fixedly for a minute in the direction Teddy had indicated. "Fireflies, I reckon."

Teddy was disgusted.

"Don't you suppose I know fireflies from a camp fire?" Then, as the branches parted in a natural arch and a faint light could be seen: "Now will you believe me?"

"There's a man there!" Roy was as excited as his brother. "I can see him! He's sitting on a rock! Look! He's turning around!"

As the man turned and took a brand from the fire to light his pipe, Teddy gave a yell of delight.

"Jack!" he shouted shrilly. "Jack Forrester!"

Chapter XXII

THE OLD MAN TELLS HIS STORY

At the sound of Teddy Manley's voice the man on the rock jumped up; reached for his pistol, and stood with it in his hand as if expecting an attack.

"Who is it?" he demanded shrilly. "If it's you rascals again; come one step nearer and I'll put a bullet through you! Ain't goin' to stand no more nonsense from you waddies!"

"It's Roy and Teddy Manley," called Roy. "We've been searching all over the Rockies for you. Gosh, but I'm glad you're found! We'd about given you up, Jack, and concluded that you must have been killed."

Forrester lowered his pistol and his eyes brightened.

"I'm sure glad to see you kids," he said heartily, extending his hand as the boys came forward. "Thought you were down and out, what with those waddies and the storm and everything. "Where's your brons?"

"Lost," Teddy hastened to tell him. "Star and Flash and the duffel horse with all our supplies. And we're lost ourselves," he added.

"So am I," admitted Forrester soberly. "Don't know which way is east or west or anything. All turned around, and thought I'd never see anybody again."

"We'll get out now we've found you," said Roy confidently. "But what happened to you, anyway, Jack? Wow, but I bet it's a whale of a story!"

"It is, and a long one," replied Forrester. "When I left——"

"Say!" interrupted Teddy, "got anything to eat, Jack? We're half starved. Lost all our provisions when

the bronco went off and haven't had anything to eat since except part of a deer that I shot."

Teddy walked over to where some boxes had been piled under a tree. After a second glance he gave a shout of astonishment.

"Gosh, that looks like some of our grub! It is, as sure as I'm alive! Off the duffel horse! How come, Jack?"

"Tell you later," answered Forrester. "That's part of the story," and he went over to his bronco that was tethered near by and took some provisions from a box at the back of the saddle.

"Here's crackers and cheese and some corned beef. I'll make some coffee in two minutes."

When the boys had eaten, Teddy seated himself on a rock, leaned back against a tree, and announced that he had never felt better in his life.

"Now tell your story, Jack," he said. "I bet it will be a big one!"

"When I left you two boys," began Forrester, knocking the ashes from his pipe and filling it again, "I intended to go just to the top of the hill and see if I could locate Bitter Rock Creek. Was just a little turned around myself and didn't know exactly which way to go next."

Teddy looked at Roy and winked.

"Thought so," he said. "But go ahead, Jack, with your story. Excuse the interruption."

"It was farther than I thought," went on Forrester, "and after I got to the top I found that the creek was just where I thought it wouldn't be. I stood there for some minutes to get the exact direction fixed in my mind and had just started to come down when, whang! something hit me on the back of the head and I fell, boom!"

"Knocked you out?" Teddy wanted to know, his eyes shining with excitement.

"It sure did! I don't know how long it was before I came to, but when I did I was all trussed up like a turkey 'gobbler' all ready to be roasted. Those waddies had loaded me on to one of their broncs and were toting me along as fast as they could go."

"What happened when you woke up?" asked Roy, who wanted to get to the climax of the story without delay. "Did you have a fight?"

"I didn't let on for some time but what I was still out," replied Forrester. "Wanted to get the lay of the land if I could and listen to what those rascals had to say. But they were foxy and didn't talk none. They had put a gag in my mouth so I couldn't say a word. Finally, we came to a small grove, and both of 'em lifted me off the bronc and dumped me on the ground. Thought that was about time to come to, so I opened my eyes."

"Did they tell you why you had been kidnapped?" asked Teddy anxiously.

"Sure thing! After they saw I was awake, they untied me and took off the gag. 'What you waddies do this for?' I asked. Gosh, I was sore! If I'd had a pistol I'd 'a' shot both of 'em, but they'd swiped my guns while I was asleep.

"'Don't worry,' said the one they call Chick. 'We ain't goin' to hurt you none. Are we, Stubby?'"

"'Certainly not,' says Stubby, with a grin on his ugly face. Gosh, how those pockmarks did show up an' the gash at the end of his mouth looked longer than ever! 'Jest goin' to make things comfortable for you for a few weeks,' says he. 'So don't git alarmed.'"

"'What's the idea?' I asked.

"'Oh, so long as we couldn't git a slice o' that water money, we're not goin' to let you git any,' says Stubby. 'Serve you right fer not stickin' to your bargain.'"

"'Thought that was the dodge,' commented Roy. 'They're certainly low-down rascals.'"

Forrester nodded.

"Yeah, they are," he agreed. "But I let on I was kinda dumb and didn't quite understand. 'Goin' to keep me here until the water company's bought another tract of land, and can't any of us get a slice o' that money?' I asked.

"You've guessed it, pard,' says Stubby, with his ugly grin. 'Now make yourself to home and don't try any funny little tricks an' we'll git along fine. How about eats, Chick? Reckon the gentleman is hungry.'

"I was that, and after I'd eaten I crawled under a pile of branches and went to sleep, I was that tired. 'Slept all night an' didn't wake up once.

"The next mornin' we just lay around and didn't do much, and then the storm came up. It was a ripsnorter, all right, but we got under a big cliff and didn't get wet much. After it was over Stubby went off to see what he could find.

"In about an hour he came back loaded down with boxes and tin cans.

"That bronc of the Manley kids fell over a cliff and broke his neck,' he said, grinning. 'Didn't want the grub to go to waste, so I bringed it along. It'll make a few good meals for the three o' us. Them kids sure has got a swell cook,' and he began to eat some fruit cake he had found."

"The duffel horse!" exclaimed Roy. "Poor old Ned! Thought something had happened to him. Well, I'm glad that you got the grub, Jack; better than letting those rascals have it. But go on with your story."

"Well, as I said, for two or three days after that we didn't go very far, on account of the storm makin' the travellin' bad. One o' them waddies would go off with his gun to see if he could find something to shoot, while the other kept watch of me. I played possum, though. Made out I was all discouraged at the way things had

turned out and I hadn't gumption enough to run away if I had the chance."

"Did they treat you badly?" asked Teddy.

"No, they treated me pretty good," said Forrester. "But they wouldn't let me out of their sight. At night one of them kept watch while the other slept."

The two rascals' watchfulness of the grim old prospector amused Roy.

"How did you finally get away?" he asked, as Forrester paused to light his pipe again.

"Morning before last," resumed Forrester, "I woke up early and could hear them waddies arguin' about which way was Bitter Rock Creek. They couldn't agree, and, thinkin' I was still asleep, they went up to the top of the hill to take a look. I got up quietly and crawled up behind 'em. They was standin' on the edge of a cliff with their backs towards me and didn't hear me comin'.

"Well," Forrester paused and laughed grimly, "I give Stubby a boot in the seat of the pants and Chick I lam-basted in the back! Wow, how those fellers did sail through the air! Couldn't 'a' gone faster if they'd had one of them airplanes."

"You knocked them over the cliff?" Teddy's eyes were big and round.

"Knocked 'em over? I'll say I did! Gosh, you ought to 'a' heard them fellers yell and seen 'em clawin' the air as they toppled over. I could hear them crash an' go smash below as they hit some trees and bushes, I reckon. I guess that fall fixed 'em all right; haven't heard nothin' from 'em since."

"What did you do then?"

Roy did not approve of Forrester's method of getting rid of his enemies, but he made no comment.

"I beat it back to the camp, loaded the duffel on the back of my bronc, and rode off. Wasn't goin' to take no

chances hanging around. Them fellers are tough an' maybe a fall over a cliff wouldn't hurt 'em. Made as fast time as I could, an' here I am!" and Forrester grinned broadly.

"Hot dog!"

Teddy was elated at the outcome of their adventures.

"Now all we have to do is to go back home and claim the money. I feel like starting now, but I reckon we'd better wait until to-morrow."

At Teddy's words, Forrester's face, which had been animated and alive with enthusiasm, while telling his story, grew sullen and he scowled darkly.

"Consarn it!" he growled, "why did you waddies have to butt in like you did? In another minute I'd 'a' had that hundred dollars in my mitts. Haven't seen that amount of money all to once in two years. Now it's gone, an' there ain't any chance of gettin' the other, for we're lost."

Forrester paused and glowered at the boys fiercely.

"Wish you had stayed at home and minded your own business," he added. "Some folks are always buttin' in. Consarn it!"

Chapter XXIII

SAVED

At Jack Forrester's outburst the two X Bar X boys looked at each other in surprise, and Teddy's eyes flashed fire.

"We tried to keep you from being swindled, Mr. Forrester, and this is the thanks we get for it," he snapped resentfully. "Gosh! we've been through enough trouble all on account of you, and you ought to treat us better than this. Hot dog! I wish we'd stayed at home."

and let you go for the rest of your life hunting for gold, which you'll never find!" and Teddy glowered in indignation at the old prospector.

"Softly, Ted," interposed Roy, although he himself was hurt by Forrester's words. "Mr. Forrester is sore because he thinks he isn't going to get anything. If we don't get to the ranch in time to put through that water deal, Mr. Forrester," he continued, turning to the old man, who was still sullen and angry, "I'm sure Dad will make good to you the loss of that hundred dollars. He's always ready to see fair play. I think with Ted," he added, "we don't deserve to be talked to like that."

Forrester said nothing for a minute, but stood looking at the ground. Then he raised his eyes to the boys.

"Forgive me," he mumbled. "I'm gittin' old and cantankerous, and the sight of that money, I reckon, put me off my senses. I've done without it all my life, and I reckon I can until the end. Don't let Bard Manley know that I was such a fool, even if we don't get there in time."

"To-morrow we start!" interrupted Teddy, mollified at the old man's words. "How long do you think it will take us to make the ranch, Mr. Forrester?"

Forrester shook his head gloomily.

"I'm all turned around and tangled up, with those waddies carrying me off as they did," he admitted. "Don't know where I am or which way to go. You might as well know it first as last."

"But I do," answered Teddy. Then he told the prospector that he thought the river was the source of Bitter Rock Creek.

Forrester listened intently, but shook his head several times as Teddy proceeded.

"Reckon you're wrong kid," he said. "This here rushing river that you tell about is probably just an outlet from a lake which has overflowed on account of the

storm. Bitter Rock Creek rises in Tumble Mountain, and we're beyond that, I'm sure. I know we've got to get out of here pronto, as your dad and Mr. Ball had only thirty days to make good on that agreement. I'll do the best I can," he added humbly, "and see if I can get a line on where we are."

"One more question." Teddy wanted to know everything. "What happened to Chick's and Stubby's bronchos?"

"Don't know. Reckon they ran off after I left. Didn't want to bother with 'em, as I wanted to travel fast, so I piled everything on my nag and beat it. Wish now I'd taken 'em along for your sakes."

"We'll find Star and Flash somewhere, I'm sure," said Roy confidently. "In the meantime, maybe you'll let us take turns in riding your bronc when we get tired hoofing it. Now let's turn in, for to-morrow is going to be a hard day for us all."

The next morning all three were up early. Breakfast had been eaten and everything made ready for the start before the sun showed itself over the tops of the mountain ranges.

"We'd better go down to that river you told me about," said Forrester, as the party started, "and follow it for a ways. But I'm afraid it won't lead us to Bitter Rock Creek."

The old prospector's prediction proved correct, much to the sorrow of Teddy and Roy. After skirting the banks of what at the start was a river for a couple of miles, the stream narrowed into a shallow brook, which was at last lost in a deep ravine.

"Stung again!" Teddy was disconsolate. "Thought all we'd have to do would be to follow that river down to the creek, and then strike out for home," he said. "Now, where are we?"

They had stopped to rest under the shade of a thick

clump of oaks, and Jack Forrester slumped down on a moss-covered rock. The old prospector was a pathetic figure as he sat there with sagging shoulders and listless eyes and the deep furrows in his wrinkled forehead showing more prominently than ever.

"He's all in," whispered Teddy, and Roy nodded his head gravely. "It will sure be tough if he gives up now," went on Teddy. "We mustn't let him, Roy! We can't let him!"

For several minutes no one spoke. Then Forrester raised his head and looked fixedly at the two boys.

"We're lost!" he said hoarsely. "Lost in the Rockies, as many a man has been before, whose bones have been picked by the buzzards. Lost!"

Teddy suddenly galvanised into life.

"The buzzards can't pick my bones," he said in a determined tone. "Don't know how you two fellows feel about it, but we've got to keep going. No use giving up now when the battle's nearly over. Why, man alive!" giving Forrester a resounding slap on the back, "you're nearer finding gold to-day than you ever were in your life. Buck up!"

At the admonition, Forrester smiled sadly, but he got slowly to his feet.

"All right," he said. "I'm game until I drop. Don't let's talk any longer. Come ahead!"

All that day the three wandered around hopelessly in the mountains. Sometimes the trails ran straight, but more often they were crooked. Many times they twisted and turned and curved, until the boys felt almost dizzy and were forced to admit that they did not know which way they were going.

All took turns in riding Forrester's bronco. The animal, already loaded with supplies, felt the added weight keenly and proceeded slowly with lowered head and an occasional whinny of protest.

The country at that point was especially wild and rugged. Great masses of rock were piled up one on another until it seemed as if giant builders had been at work, erecting a huge, natural monument.

Suddenly, came a weird, moaning cry, which swelled loudly and then died away again.

"What's that?" Teddy was not quite sure, but Forrester knew what that dismal howl meant. He had heard it many times before.

"Wolves!" he said calmly, "and they're comin' this way. Reckon we're in for it. If we've got plenty of ammunition maybe we can hold 'em off for some time. Maybe!"

The wolves stopped howling suddenly, and there was no sound but the crack, crack, crackle of breaking twigs as a fox, alarmed by the approach of its natural enemy, dashed for safety.

"Keep together," advised Jack Forrester. "They'll try to rush us."

Roy caught sight of a slim, dark form that showed itself, ghostlike, between two trees.

Crack! Bang!

The bullets tore through the leaves and bit into a tree, but otherwise apparently did no damage.

"Missed him!" groaned Forrester. "Wasn't close enough. Better wait until you can see the shine of their eyes."

Then a swiftly running form launched itself in the direction of Roy, who was some yards to the left of the others.

So quickly did it come that the boy had not time to fire. The wolf's jaws hit together with an ominous click as they just missed Roy's outstretched arm.

With a snarl, the beast turned and, with bared fangs, lunged again at Roy, who had slipped on the smooth pine needles and had not regained his feet,

'Thud! Smash!

Jack Forrester suddenly hurtled through the air in the direction of the on-coming wolf.

They met with a crash, and then man and beast went to the ground fighting desperately. The old man seemed a bundle of wires, so quickly did he act. Twisting and turning and squirming to avoid the teeth of the wolf, with sure thrusts of his hunting knife he ripped open the animal's stomach.

Swish! Cut! Stab! Again and again Forrester's knife fell, and when it came away it was covered with crimson.

No animal could long withstand that terrific onslaught. With a throaty growl, the wolf relaxed its grip on Forrester, struggled for a moment with its long legs beating the air, then rolled over on its side, dead.

Forrester sprang quickly to his feet and wiped his hunting-knife on a clump of grass. Neither boy had dared fire at the wolf for fear of shooting the old man.

"Are you hurt, Jack? You must be half killed!" and Roy bounded forward expecting to find the prospector cut and mutilated.

"Nope! Just mussed up a bit. Thought you'd get him, didn't you?" and Forrester gave the body of the wolf a kick. "But old Jack was too quick for you. Feel as fine as a fiddle," he added, as Teddy was solicitous. "Do that kind of thing every night for my daily dozen."

"You saved my life!" Roy grasped Forrester's hand and shook it warmly. "How can I ever repay you?"

"'Twasn't nothin'," said the old man modestly. "I was real mean to you a spell back, about buttin' in. Ought to have known it was all for the best," and the old prospector's voice trailed wearily. "Now we're even," looking ruefully at a rent in his coat that had been torn by the wolf's teeth. "Don't speak of it again, and we'll——"

Snap! Crack! Crash!

A vivid flash of lightning streaked across the sky, followed by a loud crash of thunder. It was one of those summer storms that come up quickly in the Rockies and go as suddenly as they come. In the excitement of the fight the boys had not noticed the dark cloud that approached rapidly.

There was a howl of wind and a dash of pelting rain that came in great, white sheets. No shelter was in sight, and for several minutes the three struggled on, preferring to keep moving rather than to risk standing under the giant trees which at any moment might be struck by a bolt of lightning.

The rain ceased as suddenly as it had come. The clouds piled themselves up in great mountains of white, and the blue of the sky appeared as the sun broke through. The boys could see Forrester, who was some distance ahead of them, standing still and looking fixedly to the right of the trail.

Then he shouted and began to run swiftly. For an old man, he covered the ground with amazing speed, and the boys had to exert themselves to keep him in sight. As they rounded a corner in the trail the prospector turned towards them, his face aglow.

"I've found them!" he shrilled wildly. "The red trip-lets! We're saved! Saved!" and he began to dance wildly and throw his hat in the air.

Chapter XXIV

THE THIRTIETH DAY

"Crazy as a loon!" whispered Teddy Manley, aghast at the thought, to his brother. "Jack Forrester's gone clean off his nut. The strain has been too much for him. Something's snapped in his head!"

"Poor old Jack!" Roy agreed with his brother that the prospector had suddenly gone insane. "Couldn't stand the thought of getting so much money after all these years of struggle. We're in a nice mess now, Ted, tell a maverick!"

"We sure are," agreed Teddy. "Wonder what we'd do. Have to humour him, I suppose. Hope he don't get violent, though I guess we could handle him together."

But Jack Forrester gave ample proof during the next few minutes that he was never saner in his long life than at the present time.

"It's the red triplets," he explained when he returned to the boys. "You know them, don't you?"

Teddy shook his head.

"Never had the pleasure of meeting them," he answered. "Who are they, Jack?"

Forrester laughed. It was not the laugh of a man bereft of his senses, but that of a happy boy who had been liberated from school for the season.

"Thought you knew," he said, grinning. "They're three tall, red oaks that make a landmark in this part of the Rockies. Hunters and others always steer their course by the red triplets. Why, kids!" and the eyes of the old prospector glowed again, "if we had our broncos we'd be at the X Bar X in a day. Seeing how we've got to hoof it, it may be day after to-morrow before we get there, but no later."

"Are you sure? Oh, Jack! We thought you'd gone bug-house!" Teddy was so relieved that he felt faint.

"Me crazy?" Forrester grinned broadly. "Not much! Lost my bearings for a spell, that's all. And to think of it, we were on the right trail all the time! There they are," he added, as they came in sight of three enormous red oaks that towered to the sky. "Red triplets, meet the Manley brothers!"

“Never so glad to see anybody in our lives as we are to see you,” responded Teddy, bowing low in the direction of the trees. “Red triplets, you’ve saved our lives!”

So great was the enthusiasm of the boys, now that they knew they were on the right road for home, that they trudged on without weariness until after night had fallen, and it was only because of the difficulty in finding their way in the darkness that they decided to make camp.

Tired though they were, the three sat talking long after the camp fire was built, Forrester telling many stories of his adventurous life, the boys in turn relating tales of their life on the ranch.

“I’ve known Bard Manley for more than thirty years,” observed Forrester, as the talk slackened, “and I’ve always found him to shoot straight. Reckon you’re chips from the old block,” he added. “You’ve treated me white and I didn’t deserve it.”

Teddy grinned at his brother.

“Don’t think, Jack,” he said, “that we did it for your sake alone. If we could get you there on time there’d be a bunch of money for Dad, as well as for Peter Ball and you. Just a little matter of business,” and Teddy imitated Stubby’s low, rumbling voice.

“Haw, haw, haw!” Forrester laughed loudly. “Sounds just like that old rascal!” he exclaimed. “Jumpin’ crickets, but I’m glad I didn’t sign up with them! Would never have forgiven myself. Got a great deal to thank you boys for,” and the old man looked thoughtfully at them.

Roy, who had been doing some mental figuring, suddenly raised a shout.

“Say, you waddies!” he exclaimed excitedly, “do you know what to-morrow is?”

“No, I don’t,” answered Teddy promptly. “But I’ll bite. What is to-morrow?”

"The thirtieth day," responded Roy. "That water company's lawyer said he'd give Dad thirty days to produce Jack Forrester, and it's thirty days to-morrow. Just figured it out. Wow! we've got to get there to-morrow no matter what happens."

Forrester looked at him thoughtfully.

"We can't hardly do it by walking," he said. "But why not let Teddy take the bronco and ride ahead and tell 'em we're comin'? We can follow on foot, and most likely he could ride back with some horses for us. Bet there's a lot of 'em at the ranch eatin' their heads off."

"Gosh, that's just the thing!" exclaimed Teddy, in delight. "Why didn't I think of it before!"

"You didn't think of it now, you fakir," teased Roy. "Give Jack the credit, will you? You wouldn't have thought of such a plan in a thousand years."

"Might have." Teddy did not like to give in, even when he knew he was in the wrong. "It's Jack's idea all right, and it's a good one. Wonder if I could start to-night; get there sooner if I did!"

"No!" Jack and Roy spoke in unison. "It wouldn't be safe and you couldn't find your way," continued Forrester. "In the morning I'll give you some pointers so you won't get lost. I can tell you the trails to follow so that you will get there in the quickest time."

Teddy reluctantly admitted that it would be a better plan to wait until morning, and the three accordingly made a bed under a convenient windfall and were soon asleep.

"Say, you waddies! are you going to sleep all day?"

It was Teddy's voice in the early dawn that awakened the other two. The boy was eager to be gone, and could scarcely wait to eat his breakfast. ••

"I'll tell Norah you're coming, too," he said to Roy, "and she'll put up a big spread. My, won't some of her hot biscuits taste good!"

• “Norah! Is she Roy’s girl?” asked Forrester, grinning.
• “Ho, ho! That’s a good joke! No, she’s the cook at the ranch,” explained Teddy. “She sure can shake a mean rolling pin. Just wait until you get to the X Bar X.”

“Always thought if I ever got married it would be to a cook,” said Forrester seriously. “Now this, Norah—when I get my thirty thousand dollars and all the cents, do you think she’d like——”

“Never know what your luck will be, Jack. I’ll speak a good word for you,” and Teddy grinned as he wondered what Norah Moore would say when she saw the little, broken-down prospector.

The boys unloaded the duffel from Forrester’s bronco and made it up into packages, two of which Roy and Forrester agreed to carry. The third part was packed behind the saddle. Then Teddy leaped to the pony’s back.

“We’ll walk with you until we come to a birch grove that’s near here,” said Forrester. “Then I’ll give you your bearings how to get to the ranch.”

For half a mile Roy and the old prospector trudged along behind Teddy on the bronco. They had just sighted the grove of birches that stood out distinctly against a background of dark firs when Teddy gave a shout and reined in the bronco.

“Look!” he exclaimed excitedly, pointing to the edge of the woods. “Do you see two broncs over there?”

“Sure thing!” Forrester’s eyes, although old, were keen and trustworthy. “Bet they’re those waddies’ nags!”

“They aren’t!” cried Roy. “They’re our own Star and Flash, I’ll tell a maverick! Now, Jack, we won’t have to walk at all. Ride up to ’em, Teddy, and bring them in.”

Teddy had just turned his bronco’s head in the direction of the two ponies when Forrester gave a startled exclamation.

"Jumpin' crickets! There's those two rascals, and they're goin' to beat us to it again. Let me take your rifle, a minute, son," turning to Roy.

The boys looked in the direction Forrester indicated and saw two men skulking along the edge of the woods, evidently with the idea of capturing the broncos.

"It's Chick and Stubby!" cried 'Teddy. "I'm going for them!" and forgetting all else in his desire to prevent the men from getting Star and Flash, he dashed away.

Crack! Bang!

Forrester fired twice, but the distance was too great and the bullets whizzed harmlessly through the air.

The firing, however, attracted the men's attention, and, seeing Teddy's fast riding, they redoubled their efforts to reach the horses first.

Roy and Forrester were running also, and made good time over the smooth grass of the level space between them and the woods.

Nearer and nearer to Star and Flash approached the two men, running as fast as their legs would carry them. Nearer and nearer drew 'Teddy, the little bronco galloping faster than it ever had before.

Teddy withheld his fire until he was near enough for it to take effect. Just then, Chick and Stubby, who were almost up to the broncos, gave a flying leap towards their backs.

Bang! Bang! Crack! Crack!

Teddy brought his rifle to his shoulder and fired. At the same moment Roy's rifle spoke twice.

Stubby flopped to the ground clutching his side. Chick, who had been a little nearer to the broncos than his companion, missed the saddle by a few inches and brought up against Star's side with a thud, then slid to the ground. He lay there for a moment, then attempted to rise, but one leg was wounded and would not support him.

“Don’t fire again,” cautioned Roy. “They’re too near the broncs, we might hit them instead. Say, you waddies!” he shouted to the two men, who were now crawling towards the woods, “have you had enough! If you haven’t there’s more waiting for you!”

Chick and Stubby, however, had had enough. They increased their speed, crawling on all fours, until they reached a patch of underbrush and then crashed through it and disappeared.

“Let ’em go,” said Roy. “We don’t want them now we’ve got the broncs. There isn’t a hair of their hides hurt!” he announced delightedly, after looking over the animals thoroughly. “Saddles and everything are O.K. We’re in luck, I’ll tell a maverick!”

“Guess we are, but I sure hate to let those rascals off so easily,” said Teddy.

Teddy dismounted from Forrester’s pony and was soon on the back of Flash, while Roy mounted the delighted Star, who was pawing the ground ready again to carry his master.

“Now, we’re off!” shouted Teddy, as the three galloped down the trail in the direction of the ranch. “Look out, old X Bar X, we’re coming!”

Chapter XXV

JUBILEE AT THE X BAR X

The sun was just going down when the X Bar X boys and their companion came in view of the low, rambling buildings of their father’s ranch. The boys thought they had never seen anything so beautiful as the sight of those yellow-roofed buildings, whose windows burned and glowed like fire as they caught the rays of the sun.

"There it is! There's the X Bar X!" cried Teddy, excitedly to Jack Forrester, who was riding by his side. "My, but I'm glad we're home again! Aren't you, Jack?"

Forrester's eyes grew a little moist at the boy's enthusiasm. "I sure am, Teddy," he answered. "And I can imagine the reception you two boys will get in another few minutes."

"We'll be there in ten," said Roy. "Let's go slow, Teddy, so they won't hear us, and surprise them. That will be fun."

"All right," Teddy agreed. "But not too slow. I'm in a hurry to get there!"

Five minutes later, as the party was nearing the ranch, there came a series of yells from the direction of the bunk-house.

"Whoopee! Yow, yow! Hooray! Yip, yip, yip! Hooray!"

"They've seen us, no use going slow any more!" and Teddy dashed away in a cloud of dust, but with Roy and Forrester at his heels.

When the party came up the ranch yard was filled with wildly cheering cowboys, who swarmed around the Manley boys and their companion, anxious to hear their story.

"Mom and Dad first," said Roy. "Tell you fellows all about it later," and the two boys dashed up the steps, and into their mother's arms, who had come hurriedly out on the veranda.

"We've had a whale of a time, Mom dear!" exclaimed Teddy as he hugged and kissed the little woman, followed by Roy. "Take a day to tell all the story. Where's Dad?"

"Here, son!" and Bardwell Manley joined his wife, his eyes glowing with pleasure at seeing his sons again.

"We found him and brought him in, Dad," said Roy proudly. "Here he is!"

The two former partners gripped each other's hands.

"It's good to see you, Jack, after all these years!" exclaimed Mr. Manley heartily. "You're just in time. The lawyer from Denver is inside, and we were beginning to be afraid that you and the boys wouldn't show up to-day."

"They did it!" Jack's voice trembled a little. "If it hadn't been for them I'd still be huntin' gold. They're fine boys, Bard. Just like you used to be when you were young; chips off the old block."

"No bouquets, Jack, unless you include Mom," exclaimed Roy. "Dad's all right, but if it hadn't been for Mom——" and the boy put his arm around his mother's shoulders and drew her towards him.

"You're right about that," responded Forrester heartily.

When the boys and Forrester had been seated in the little ranch office, the representative of the water company brought out of his pocket a long, legal-looking document which he handed to Mr. Manley.

"There's the contract, transferring all the rights of you three men to the water company," he said. "Read it and see if it is in order."

Mr. Manley read the contract aloud, and as it was approved, it was quickly signed. First by Mr. Manley, then by Peter Ball, and lastly by Jack Forrester, whose gnarled hands had some trouble in manag^{ing} the pen.

The lawyer smiled as he put the contract back into his pocket, and then took from his pocket-book three cheques which he laid on the table.

"According to agreement," he said, "there is a cheque for each of you men for thirty-three thousand, three hundred and thirty-three dollars and thirty-three cents, which I believe completes the transaction."

Forrester's hand shook violently as he took the cheque.

"Struck gold at last," he murmured, as he sat looking at the yellow slip of paper. "At last, after all these years!"

As soon as the lawyer had gone the boys gave vent to their feelings by doing a dance around the room.

"We did it!" exclaimed Teddy. "I knew we would!"

"Only a few times you weren't quite sure," returned Roy tauntingly. "Nor Jack either. But it doesn't matter now that we're back and you all have the cheques. That's what counts!"

Mr. Manley smiled.

"You boys certainly deserve a great deal of credit for what you have done," he said. "I'll hear the details later on, but now we must make Jack comfortable, and——"

"Say, Dad," interrupted Teddy, "where do you get that credit stuff? Don't you remember that before we left you said something about cold cash if we found Forrester and brought him back? Didn't he, Roy?"

"Sure did," replied Roy. "And Dad always makes good his promises," he added, grinning.

"I was just goin' to say when you interrupted," said Mr. Manley, with a twinkle in his eyes, "that I am goin' to give each of you boys a thousand dollars in appreciation of the good work you've done. Wait a minute and I'll write you a cheque."

The boys watched breathlessly as their father wrote the cheques and signed them. Then he handed them to the eager boys.

"Thanks, Dad," began Roy. "We appreciate——" but Peter Ball interrupted.

"Get out of that chair, Bardwell, and let me sit at the desk," he commanded. "Got a little to say about this business myself," and Mr. Ball quickly wrote two cheques for like amounts which he gave to the astonished boys.

"We didn't expect this from you, Mr. Ball," said Teddy, his eyes sparkling. "We simply did our best to help Jack, and——"

The gruff voice of Jack Forrester interrupted.

"Say, Bard, where do you get those cheque thin Ain't I goin' to get any?"

"You can deposit your cheque in the bank in Hawley to-morrow if you like," he said. "They will give you a cheque book."

"Me and you for Hawley to-morrow!" exclaimed Jack. "An' the first cheques I write will be for one thousand each to Roy and Teddy Manley. Then I reckon we'll be even all around. Say, boys, don't you ever eat at this ranch? I could eat a boiled owl."

"Norah will be ready with the supper in a few minutes," announced Mrs. Manley, who had come in from the kitchen. "She's getting up a special supper to celebrate the event of your being found, Mr. Forrester. You won't be sorry you've waited when you eat it."

Teddy grinned at Forrester behind his mother's back and Forrester winked at him, knowing that the boy had remembered what he had said about marrying a cook.

That supper was a never-to-be-forgotten one at the X Bar X ranch. Jack Forrester had the seat of honour. Mrs. Manley had invited Nick Looker, the boys' special cowboy friend, to eat in the ranch-house that evening, as well as several others of the punchers, including Nat Raymond, Gus Tripp, whose wife was still away, and Pop Burns.

Norah Moore, resplendent in a new yellow apron, heaped the good things on Forrester's plate until the prospector begged her not to give him another thing or else he would "bust". Norah, however, smiled sweetly and gave him "just another helping", which Forrester seemed to have no trouble in disposing of.

After the meal was over, Teddy and Roy told of their ventures. The tale was often interrupted by remarks from Jack Forrester, when he thought they were not giving themselves their full due of credit.

"Gosh! it's been a great night," said Forrester as he rose stiffly from the table and started with the boys for the veranda. "Couldn't eat another thing if my life depended on it. Say," he whispered to Teddy, as he drew the boy to one side, "was that woman who brought in all those things the cook you told me about?"

"Sure was," answered the delighted Teddy. "Her name's Norah Moore and she's the best cook in this part of the country. Thinking again about what you said back on the trail?"

"Well," said Jack confusedly, "she's some swell cook, and a nifty-looker, too. Was kinder wondering if, after I get that cheque cashed, she and I couldn't take a trip to Hawley and——"

Five minutes later Teddy, who had slipped into the kitchen to tell Norah how good her supper had been, found himself questioned by that lady with particular reference to the prospector.

"That Mr. Forrester you brought back with you appears to be an uncommonly intelligent man," stated Norah. "He's travelled a lot, it seems. Did I hear you say that he's one of the men that are in on that water deal your Dad's put over?"

"He sure is, Norah. He and Peter Ball and Dad have a third interest each."

"If it isn't impertinent," went on Norah, "might I ask about how much that will bring him in?"

"Thirty-three thousand, three hundred and thirty-three dollars and thirty-three cents, to be exact," laughed Teddy. "Have you got your eye on him, Norah?"

Norah Moore blushed vividly.

"That's a pile of money," she said coyly. "Mr.

Forrester's getting along in years and he ought to have somebody to look out after him. I was just wondering——"

Just then the wind slammed the door and Teddy did not catch the last of Norah's remark.

